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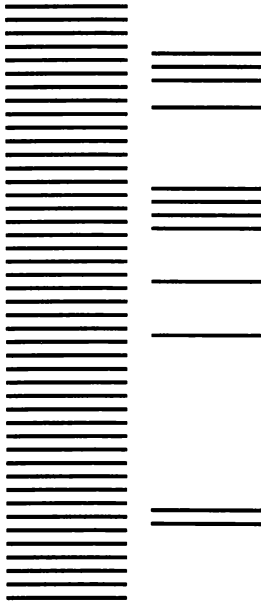

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Yes, gentle reader, you've guessed right. It's that lovable soul, Alfred Hitchcock, on the prowl again.

Once more that master of the arts of mayhem, murder and other monstrous acts has set out to unearth a ghoulish feast for your unholy delight.

And once more he's succeeded. But why listen to us? Just open up this book to find out what Alfie has dug up for you.

But don't say we didn't warn you. . . .

HAPPINESS IS A WARM CORPSE

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

A DELL BOOK

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HAPPINESS IS A WARM CORPSE

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INTRODUCTION

If people did not purchase stolen goods, the burglary rate would decline in all parts of the country. This is a statement of such far reaching consequence that, once you have read it, your outlook on buying hot merchandise may never be the same. Forewarned is to be forearmed.

Recently, while I was stopped for a red light, an unsavory character wearing a plaid cap and of furtive demeanor pulled up alongside my car and whispered, "I got a suit that will fit you perfectly."

I was curious as to how he knew my size, since all he could view of me was my head, and simultaneously I suspected that this nervous, becapped man, whom I shall refer to hereinafter as "The Cap," was offering me a stolen suit.

Nevertheless, he hadn't said that the suit was stolen. Instead, I had made a judgment to that effect merely because he wore a plaid cap and appeared to be a citizen of dubious character. I had wronged him. I had judged him and found him guilty without benefit of trial. What is honesty? How do you define it? Was I willing to write off this man's character, integrity or nobility of purpose, merely because he kept glancing back over his shoulder as he spoke to me?

Perhaps he had a haberdashery somewhere that wasn't doing too well and he had taken to the road to increase his sales, or perhaps he had a wife and numerous children to support. Yes, that was it, I thought, and in a moment of rare impetuosity, I said, "I am not especially fond of narrow lapels." I was committed. Whereupon he smiled and said in dulcet tones that he had a large variety from which to choose. I might add that I am a great admirer of successful suit

thieves and I found the thought of somehow outwitting the law stimulating.

And so, the trap of my own making was sprung and I fell into it. However, I was not the first man to fall victim to this human foible.

I wonder how many of you know that Ludovico Sforza, who invented the Iron Shroud, was the first individual to suffer death by this hideous device. Or are you aware that, in ancient Greek times, Perillos of Athens constructed a bronze bull for Phalaris, the dictator? The hollow bull was intended for the execution of criminals, who would be locked up in the contraption while fires were lighted below the bull's belly.

Phalaris thought Perillos' invention had great possibilities and he asked Perillos to step inside the metal monster to test its efficiency. The result, as you may already have gathered, was baked Perillos, a tragedy not to be taken lightly.

And did you know that Hugues Aubriot, Provost of Paris, who built the Bastille, was the first person incarcerated in that grim edifice, under the charge of heresy?

In Scotland, the Regent Morton, the inventor of the Maiden, a crueler and more sophisticated version of the guillotine, was himself beheaded on it. Obviously, he had never learned to leave well enough alone.

In England, Thomas Montacute, fourth Earl of Salisbury, was the first to use cannon. At this point you are no doubt aghast, telling yourself that Montacute, the first man to use cannon, could not have been destroyed by cannon fire.

I assure you that he was. Thomas Montacute, fourth Earl of Salisbury, was the first Englishman killed by a cannon ball at Tourelles in 1428. As a result, to this day I will not eat Salisbury steak, since it inevitably conjures up a mental picture of the Earl being hit with a cannon ball.

The list is endless. In short, then, these are the people who have fallen into their own net.

This, of course, brings me back to "The Cap," who now supplies my suits and who conducts his business from an

apartment with a steel door, a peephole and a heavy steel bar wedged between door and floor.

To gain entrance you knock on the portal to the tune of "Shave and a Haircut, Two Bits." And while he has never openly said that the suits were stolen—he allows you to see the labels before he cuts them out—you do have to leave the apartment via the basement.

When the police broke in, I was trying on a mohair suit and I immediately reminded them of my constitutional rights. I wasn't going to say anything until I had spoken to my attorney.

To my amazement, "The Cap" produced invoices for every article of apparel in the place. Imagine my embarrassment, if you will. Not only had he fooled me into believing that his suits were stolen, but he had also convinced the police, who obviously labored under the same misapprehension.

Naturally, they apologized profusely.

Needless to say, my ego has been dealt a shattering blow. However, I've just heard of a man called "The Automobile," who has new automobiles which he is willing to sell for a fraction of their listed price. I feel sure that, if I can purchase a new, gleaming model, I will once again regain my usual ebullient good spirits.

In the meantime, if you will be kind enough to read the following stories, I can assure you of full and honest value.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

ONCE UPON A BANK FLOOR . . .

James Holding, Jr.

I USUALLY BUY a mystery story magazine to kill the tedium of a plane ride, but this time I didn't need it. The man who had the window seat beside me was better than any magazine.

He was middle-aged and dressed conservatively but rather carelessly. He had a double chin and bushy brows over gentle brown eyes. When I sat down in the aisle seat beside him before takeoff, he glanced casually at me. I wanted to start a conversation but just couldn't do it. And he didn't say anything until we were airborne and had unsnapped our seat belts.

His opening remark was purely tentative, a friendly overture. He said, "I see you're a mystery story fan," his eyes going to the magazine in my hand.

"Not really a fan," I said, "but I find them a pleasant way to pass the time on a plane ride."

"I'm not really a fan, either," he said. "I read mystery stories as much to keep up-to-date on the new criminal techniques as anything else."

"That could mislead a lot of people," I said, making a pleasantry of it, "into thinking you were a crook reading your trade journals."

He grinned disarmingly. "It's not as bad as that," he said. "I work for a bank. Banks deal in money, and money draws criminals. I want to be ready for trouble if they try anything on the bank where I work, that's all." He added companionably, "My name's Colbaugh."

"Mine's Dickson," I said. "Glad to know you."

He said, "I was mixed up in a bank robbery once myself, at the Merchants National Bank in . . ." He named a small

California town. "So I know how unexpectedly such things can happen."

"It sounds exciting," I remarked idly.

He shrugged. "You could call it exciting, all right." He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, evidently considering the amenities preserved.

But I wanted to get the story out of him, hear him tell it. "Tell me about it," I said.

"You'll be bored," he protested, opening his eyes again. "But all right. It's not a very long story. And it happened twenty years ago. I was a kind of assistant-assistant cashier at the bank—a clerk, really. We had a night depository at the bank where the town's merchants could deposit their cash for safekeeping after their stores closed up for the night. And as all the stores stayed open until nine o'clock on Thursday evenings in those days, there was always a good bit of cash to be found in our night depository on Friday mornings."

"I know how that goes," I said. "I own a sporting-goods store in Fresno."

"Oh, really? That's a nice part of the country. Well, one of my jobs was to get down to the bank early in the mornings and clean out the deposits in the night depository so I could have them all tallied and on the assistant cashier's desk when he arrived for work at opening time. So I was always the first one there; other employees would begin to drift in about fifteen minutes before opening time, but I had the bank to myself for a good half hour each morning. And I kind of liked it, you know? It made me feel responsible to have the run of the place before anybody else got there."

I nodded comprehendingly.

"Well, one morning I left my house about eight o'clock as usual, and I was standing on my regular corner waiting for the bus that I rode to work, when a gray Ford sedan came along and stopped beside the bus stand and the driver leaned over and asked me if I wanted a lift downtown. I said

sure and got in beside him when he pushed the car door open for me."

"In a mystery story," I said wisely, "you'd have been suspicious of the guy for offering you something for nothing. You'd have said no thanks and waited for your bus."

"Very probably. But it never entered my mind there was any hanky-panky afoot that morning. I got into the Ford and only then realized that there were two other men sitting in the back seat behind the driver and me. The thing that struck me most forcibly about them, was that the one on the right held a long-barreled revolver of some sort in his hand, and it was pointed right at me. The gun didn't have any sights on the front. I remember noticing that in my shock and surprise."

"Sounds like a Woodsman with the sights filed off," I said. "Kind of a target pistol. I sell them in my store. That joker must have been a crack shot to work with a sporting gun like that."

"As far as I was concerned, he certainly was! I didn't say or do a single thing to attract attention to my plight, I can assure you, because the man with the gun told me not to. And that was a plenty good enough reason for me.

"We drove to the bank in dead silence, but at a very sedate speed. The driver stopped the Ford at the rear of the bank where I always went in, just as though he knew all about my daily routine. The bank backed on a narrow lane, or alley, and the rear door was used only by employees. At that early hour, the lane was deserted.

"The man with the gun said to me, 'Here we are, Buster. Out.' He motioned for me to get out of the car. He and the other man in the back seat got out, too. The gun-bearer was tall and blond and skinny, painfully thin. The other fellow was chunky and had fuzzy black hair growing down the back of his neck all the way to his collar, I remember that. The tall one said to the driver, 'Stay with the crate," and then to me, 'Now, let's open up and go inside, if you don't

mind.' His voice was cool and polite and unhurried, as though he did this sort of thing every day. Maybe he did.

"I couldn't see much point in arguing when that long gun barrel was poking into my back, so I got out my keys and opened the door. As I put the key in the lock, my sleeve pulled back, and I saw by my wristwatch it was only eight-fifteen—still quite awhile before I could expect the bank guard or any of our other employees to show up. But I knew the time lock on the vault was set for just a few minutes before the bank opened, and I was pretty sure they couldn't do anything about *that,* unless they waited for opening time.

"We went inside. The tall man shattered any frail hopes I'd entertained with four words. He said to me, 'The night depository, Junior,' and I realized then that they *did* know what my routine was. They must have watched me for a few mornings to see what I did. I believe that's what they call 'casing the joint,' isn't it, Mr. Dickson?"

Colbaugh looked at me expectantly, as though wanting me to compliment him on his command of thieves' argot, derived, no doubt, from his reading of mystery stories. I said, "Yeah." It *was* strange to hear the expression come from the lips of this dignified middle-aged bank clerk.

"They forced me," he continued, "toward the night-depository receptacle in the wall of the bank inside the front door. In those days, they didn't have solid ranks of all-glass, electric-eye doors for bank entrances the way we do now. Our bank just had a regular steel-frame front door with glass in it down to knee-height like any store door. And, there was a venetian blind on the inside of this door to keep the afternoon sun out of the eyes of Mr. Johnson, one of our vice-presidents, whose desk was just to the right of the entrance. This blind was lowered after the sun moved around into Mr. Johnson's eyes every afternoon. And, it was left like that—lowered—until I came to work the next day, when I raised it as my first official act each morning on my way to clean out the night depository." Mr. Colbaugh turned his

serene eyes on me and said deprecatingly, "You can see I had a lot of odd chores to do around the bank, Mr. Dickson. I was almost the janitor, really." He laughed before he went on.

"Even with the gun in my back, habit was strong in me that morning; I reached out automatically to raise Mr. Johnson's venetian blind on the front door as we went by. But the man behind me with the gun said, 'What do you think you're doing? Freeze!' I froze. I said, 'I raise this blind every morning. I was just going to draw it up . . .' 'Today,' he said, 'we won't raise it, Junior. If you don't mind. You think we want every jerk on the sidewalk to see what's going on in here?'

"I thought I ought to make some token effort, at least, to resist the robbers, so as we approached the night depository, I said, in what I fear was a not very convincing voice, 'I can't open this thing. It takes a special key. The assistant cashier carries the only key, and he won't be here till the bank opens.'

"The short man didn't say anything, merely pulled a gun out of his pocket and went to stand beside the front door, looking out into the street through the slats of the lowered blind but hidden from the eyes of anybody outside. But the tall thin man jabbed his gun barrel harder than ever into my spine. 'Don't give me that, Buster,' he said. 'I know who opens this thing every morning. *You*. So fly at it. And don't make me wait. My nerves are getting pretty jumpy.' He didn't sound a bit nervous to me."

"But *you* must have been," I put in.

Mr. Colbaugh nodded vigorously. "I was terrified. Almost stiff with fright. I got out my key to the depository box and opened it up as meek as Moses. What else could I do?"

"I would have done the same," I consoled him.

"This was Friday morning, and there was quite a large amount of cash and a lot of checks in the depository from the merchants' Thursday night receipts. The tall man grunted with satisfaction when he saw how much was there. 'Clean

it out,' he ordered me, 'and put it in this.' He held out a black briefcase to me.

"I did as he said, but I moved as slowly as possible without it seeming too obvious. Maybe I could delay them a little, I thought. But, when the money and the checks were all in the briefcase, it was still only eight-thirty.

"I was beginning to wonder what they intended to do with me when they left. I didn't feel sanguine about that at all. I'd seen their faces. I could describe them to the police. I could identify them. And, I'd ridden in their Ford and could identify it, too, for I'd memorized the license number when I got out of the car at the rear of the bank.

"The tall man said, 'Lay down on the floor, buddy . . . on your back.' I did so. Right in the middle of the marble lobby. I felt very foolish, I can tell you. And very exposed, too. For the short man at the front door could keep me covered with his gun and watch out the door, too.

"The tall man took a look at his wristwatch. And just then the telephone rang. It was the telephone on Mr. Johnson's desk by the front door. It sounded like a fire alarm in that empty bank. I was so startled, I jumped, if you can really jump when you're lying flat on your back on the floor. The tall man stooped over me and prodded me in the stomach with his gun.

" 'Get that, you!' he barked at me. All his polite coolness was gone now. 'Answer that phone! And make it sound natural, Buster, or you'll never live to take another phone call! Move!'

"The phone was ringing for the third time. 'Hold the receiver away from your ear,' he warned me, 'so I can hear it, too.'

"I got up from the floor and went over and picked up the telephone, with the tall man right beside me. The short one hadn't said anything, but his gun was trained on me, now. I cleared my throat and said, 'Hello?' into the receiver, loud and clear. 'Is this the Merchants National?' came the

tinny inquiry, as I held the receiver so the tall man could hear it.

"His gun was boring into my back. 'Yes, sir,' I said into the phone.

" 'How late do you stay open this afternoon?' the voice asked. I looked at the bandit beside me and raised my eyebrows.

" 'Tell him!' he whispered.

"I said into the phone, 'We close at three-thirty, sir.'

" 'Thanks,' came the answer, and we could both hear the sharp click that sounded as the caller hung up.

"I put down the phone. There was sweat on my forehead and I felt sick. I looked at the short man's gun that was aimed at my midsection from five feet away, and my knees shook. The tall man let out his breath in a 'whoosh' of relief.

" 'Okay, Shiner,' he said to his pal, 'back to the door.' And to me, 'And you get back where you were, Buster.' He waved his gun at me. I lay down on the floor again.

" 'Plenty of time, Shiner,' he called to his partner, then. 'Watch the kid, here. I'm going to take a look in the tellers' cages.'

"He went out of my sight, then, and I could hear him jerking open the cash drawers and swearing when he found them empty.

"I could see the minute hand on our big wall clock above the New Accounts desk moving with tiny jerks; one jerk for every thousand years, it seemed to me. It made four of these jerks by the time the tall man was satisfied that he wasn't overlooking anything in the tellers' cages. I could have told him we always locked up the cash in the vault.

"He came out into the lobby again where Shiner and I were, the briefcase in his left hand, his gun in his right. He motioned Shiner toward the rear door of the bank, the way we'd come in. So they weren't going to wait for the time lock on the vault. They were leaving. I could hear my heart

thudding against the marble floor, as though the floor were a sounding board.

"Shiner left his post by the front door. 'What about him?' he asked the tall one, pointing his gun at me.

" 'Put him out,' the other one said matter-of-factly, 'the way I told you.' "

Mr. Colbaugh turned and looked at me with a smile softening his mouth and crinkling up his eyes. "I can tell you, Mr. Dickson, I was awfully scared at that point. I didn't know whether they meant to kill me or just knock me out, or what. 'Put him out' could have meant anything. Then I saw Shiner reversing his gun in his hand and leaning over me and swinging the butt at my head, and that's all I saw for a while."

I said, "The banking business has more hazards than I'd realized."

"It has indeed," he said. "I found out later that the bandits had another car waiting for them half a mile away, and that the Ford had been stolen. They were from out of state, it developed, and unknown in our town. So they didn't think it necessary to kill me. They just put me out of business while they made their getaway."

"So what happened?" I asked, the way a good listener should.

"The police took them easily as they emerged from the rear door of the bank," Colbaugh said. "The driver of the Ford was already in custody. The police had the bank surrounded."

We could hear the motors change pitch as our plane started to let down for a landing.

"The police!" I said, astounded. "Where'd *they* come from?"

"Johnny Sampson sent them."

I looked at him blankly. "Who was Johnny Sampson?"

"We went to high-school together," Colbaugh said. "He was my best friend in the bank, a teller."

"What made him send for the police?"

"When he telephoned the bank and asked the closing time, I told him 3:30. But he knew it closed at 3:00. So that was his signal. To call the police."

I reached up for my hat and coat as I saw the airport runways coming up to meet us.

"You mean that telephone call was rigged?" I asked. "You had it all arranged with Sampson beforehand?"

"Sure." He smiled, pleased at my surprise. "That's what I meant when I said I liked to be ready for trouble at the bank. Johnny and I had it all worked out."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "Even so, how did Sampson know he should call you that particular morning? Did he do it every day?"

"Oh, no. Johnny was a bachelor," Colbaugh said, as though that explained everything. "He always ate his breakfast around the corner at Mother Hague's Coffee Shop before coming to work at the bank. He passed the bank entrance to get to the coffee shop at the same time every morning—eight-twenty. And if he ever saw that the venetian blind on the bank's front door was still lowered when he went to breakfast, he was supposed to telephone the bank and ask what time it closed. If I answered and gave him the wrong closing time, call the police. If anybody but me answered, call the police. If nobody answered, call the police. You see how simple it was?"

"Very simple," I said, "if anything as complicated as that can be simple. What if you were sick and didn't come to work some morning and, therefore, failed to raise the venetian blind?"

"If I was sick, my wife phoned Sampson at his home before he went to breakfast and told him the venetian blind would be down when he passed it."

"How about Sampson, though? Suppose *he'd* been sick on the day of the hold-up?"

"An unlikely coincidence," Colbaugh said. "I guess that would have been just too bad for me and the night deposits."

I unfastened my seat belt as I felt the wheels touch down. "I'd say it was too bad for you anyway, wasn't it? You were the 'inside' man of your live burglar-alarm system. You took the chances. You got knocked silly by the hold-up men, while your friend Sampson ate bacon and eggs in Mother Hague's Coffee Shop."

We stood up.

"Yes, that's true, I suppose," Colbaugh conceded. "But we were young. And, as you suggested earlier, it *was* exciting. You have no idea, Mr. Dickson, how exciting it is to see a gun butt being swung at your head and then not be sure until two hours later when you regain consciousness, that you haven't been murdered!"

I said, "Are you still with Merchants National?"

"Yes, still at the same old stand. So's Johnny Sampson. He's the president of the bank now."

"Good for him. Virtue's reward. And what's your job these days, Mr. Colbaugh?"

"I'm chairman of the board," he said, smiling. "Still taking the chances, you see."

"Now, I've got the whole story." I said ambiguously. "Right down to the present."

We walked down the ramp into the airport terminal together. I was slightly behind him. My topcoat was over my right arm. On impulse, when we got inside the terminal lobby, I pushed my forefinger into his back, under cover of my topcoat, and said, "Turn left, Mr. Colbaugh, and go into the men's room, will you?"

He reacted quite calmly. His eyes widened a little as they swiveled toward me. He stiffened slightly, and I could feel his back muscles come up under my finger for a second. Then he said, "The washroom? Why?" But he kept on walking.

"Now don't tell me that your assistant cashier has the only key to *this*," I said. "Here we are. Go on in."

We went in. It was a slack time; the washroom was empty, as I'd hoped.

When the door swished shut behind us, I took my forefinger out of Colbaugh's back and he turned toward me. He really looked at me this time, tilting his head back to gaze up into my face. And he got it right away.

He said, "You've taken on a good bit of weight since then, Dickson. And changed your name. Do you really own a sporting-goods store in Fresno?"

"I was anticipating there a little," I said, smiling at him. "I *clerk* in a sporting-goods store, and I have a wonderful opportunity to buy into it if I can raise two thousand dollars by the end of this week."

"Oh," Colbaugh said. "You're going straight, then?"

"I'm trying to, since I got out." I held up my finger. "I don't file the sights off my guns any more, you see?"

He said, "Why don't you swing a loan?"

"Did you ever know anybody who would lend money to an ex-con? I've tried."

"You didn't try our bank."

"I was going to. At least I went to your bank this morning to make an appeal to you personally, if you still worked there."

"Why didn't you?"

"I lost my nerve when I saw your line-up of loan officers and vice-presidents. I knew they'd nix me for sure. It had to be you or nobody."

"So you followed me onto the plane, is that it?"

"Yes. I happened to see you walk through the bank with your hat and coat and overnight bag and get into the airport taxi. I recognized you right away. So, I followed you to the airport and bought a seat on the same flight."

He nodded, his face expressionless. "Two thousand dollars?"

"That's all. And I have no collateral, Mr. Colbaugh."

He allowed himself a tight smile. "You told Shiner to put me out that day, Dickson. He clubbed me with a gun. And remember I was just a kid."

"I know it. And I'm not proud of it. But think of it this

way, Mr. Colbaugh. Wasn't your successful prevention of that bank robbery the first thing that made your bank management really *notice* you and Sampson? Isn't that what triggered the whole series of promotions that led you both to the top jobs you have today?"

I watched him narrowly, temporarily forgetting to breathe. For this was the only weapon I could use in my second hold-up of Colbaugh.

He didn't say anything for a minute, thinking it over. Then, his lips curled up a trifle, and I began to breathe again.

"You know," he said, "I think you're right, Dickson. It *was* through you that I first drew favorable notice at the bank. I never thought of it like that before, but in a sort of cockeyed way, I suppose I owe you something for it. And so does Sampson.

"How about a thousand dollars apiece? You could call it a personal loan, Mr. Colbaugh. And I'll pay it back."

He made up his mind quickly. "I belive you will, at that," he said. He got out his checkbook and wrote out a check to cash for two thousand dollars. As he handed it to me, and we shook hands, he said curiously, "Why'd you bring me in here? Why not brace me in the plane or out in the lobby?"

I looked around at the bare white-tiled walls of the washroom and grinned at him. "No venetian blinds in here," I said.

THE EGG HEAD

Rog Phillips

I SHOULD HAVE KEPT my big mouth shut, but I was tired that night. When I got home there was a letter from our oldest, Doris, telling us she had married the scientist. Maybe I was a little put out that she hadn't brought him home to meet us first. Mostly, though, I was disappointed that she hadn't married a cop.

Anyway, I snorted, "Marrying an egg head? Huh!"

Donald and Billie and Joanne and Patricia, who had been excited at the news, sobered at once. Mom—that's my wife, Janet, but I've called her Mom or Mama since the day Doris was born—said, "Now John! That's no way to talk."

"I'm just tired," I said. "Had a rough day." I'm Captain Provident, Chief of Homicide for the past eight years. Sometimes I'm hanging onto my job by the skin of my teeth, but I never let my family know that. My kids are sure that I'm the greatest brain since Sherlock Holmes.

Hoping to find something to cheer me up, I read on in the letter. "Born and raised in Boston?" I said in dismay. This meant he was a Harvard or Yale graduate, and brought to my mind the endless string of fuzz-faced college boys assigned to the Department, who tried to tell me my business—and sometimes succeeded.

My dismay was so ludicrous that Billie started to laugh. Then they were all laughing at me, and I felt better about Doris getting married.

"I guess it's okay," I said in better humor, giving the letter back to Mom.

But it wasn't. We'd been a close-knit family, until Doris left for California two years ago. Her absence had been al-

most like a death in the family, and her frequent letters hadn't helped much. We missed her.

She had been twenty-five then and a good secretary. She hadn't found anyone in Central City to marry (plenty of them had wanted her, including some mighty fine boys on the force, but she had turned thumbs down on all of them), so she had moved to San Francisco, though God knows why San Francisco.

She'd worked at a couple of jobs she didn't like too well, and had been on the point of coming back home when she hooked onto a job at the Lawrence Radiation Labs in Berkeley. She'd been enthusiastic about it in her letters for six months, then had seemed to get bored. Mom had suspected it wasn't boredom but secretiveness, and she'd been right. Doris had met Bob Nichols, the egg head from Boston, judging from this letter.

During the next two weeks we got postcards from Niagara Falls, Starved Rock, Mammoth Caves. . . . They were doing their honeymoon up right. Then came the telegram. They would arrive Saturday afternoon. I kept my mouth shut this time. It was an effort.

Doris had grown up. I kept looking at her, trying to get used to it. Her huband seemed like a kid—or rather, a mixture of kid and old maid. His movements were fussy. He fussed with his pipe, he adjusted the ashtray on the coffee table, he fidgeted when he sat on the davenport, then crossed his legs. He cleared his throat.

He had taffy-colored hair. Ours is dark brown. He was big boned without being muscular. Donald and Billie take after me in being small boned but wiry, with quick, sure movements and biceps that can ball up like a fist, even under a shirt.

We looked at him and he looked at us, while Doris chatted happily about all the places they'd been on their honeymoon. When there were silences, Mom or Pat or Joanne

would say something quick to get Doris going again about Niagara Falls or some other part of the trip.

It was up to me, so in one of the silences I said, "Doris tells us you're a scientist, Bob."

He puffed blue smoke from his pipe. "I guess you could call me that," he said. "I'm a research chemist."

"Oh," I said.

"What does a research chemist do, Bob?" Joanne asked.

"Well . . ." He uncrossed his legs. "It's a little like what your father does. Something happens—a murder, for instance. He and his men, working as a team, gather all the evidence. Then, using the evidence, they try to identify the unknown quantity. X. The murderer. But maybe the evidence isn't enough. Then they have to figure out what X will do under certain circumstances, and arrange those circumstances, to trap him. I do much the same thing, but with chemicals instead of murderers."

"Oh," Joanne said.

"Well," Mom said with forced cheerfulness, "the Swiss steak should be done now. Pat, Joanne, set the table. Doris, Bob, I know you want to wash up after your long drive. There's towels laid out for you in the bathroom." She smiled at Bob, gave me a helpless look, then fled to the kitchen.

"Donald," I said, "why don't you and Billie bring in their suitcases."

Bob Nichols opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but Donald and Billie had fled. With a sigh Bob followed Doris upstairs, and half an hour later we were all sitting around the table.

Bob sampled the Swiss steak, smacked his lips, and said, "This is delicious, *Mother.*" The word caught me completely by surprise, and I choked.

Mom—Janet—turned the brightest shade of pink I'd seen on her since the days I courted her, almost thirty years ago. "It's just Swiss steak," she said.

"It's far more than just Swiss steak," Bob plunged on. "I hope Doris has the recipe—"

"Tell me, Bob," Billie came to the rescue, "if being a research chemist is so much like being a detective, do you think you could solve a crime?"

"I've never had the opportunity to try," Bob said. "I'm sure your father is far more—"

"Give him a crime, pop," Billie said. "You've got lots of unsolved ones." He was suckering Bob into making a fool of himself.

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Donald said, disgusted at Billie.

A case popped into my head. It had happened a year ago. We'd "solved" it but never found out who the killer was. It had sort of bothered me at the time, and that's why I thought of it now. "Why not?" I said. "I'll give you the case of Byron Jacks."

"Byron Jacks," I said, "checked into the Roosevelt Hotel, was taken to his room by a bellboy, and two minutes later he was dead. Shot through the head. The chambermaid was still in the room, so she was an eyewitness to the whole thing. The phone rang, Byron Jacks picked it up to answer it, the bullet came through the window, entered the back of his head, and did a rather ugly job coming out his left cheek. We were able to trace the flight of the bullet quite accurately, thanks to the maid's testimony. It came from a fire exit window of the Medical Building across the alley, a distance of twenty-three feet by actual measurement.

"As with most crimes, the obvious answer is the right one. The previous occupant of the room, a Chicago underworld character by the name of Joe Brady, was the intended victim. Byron Jacks had a reservation. Joe Brady had objected to moving out, right up to the last minute. We found him in the Congress Hotel three blocks from the Roosevelt where he had just checked in after trying three other hotels without success. He had been in the room at the Roosevelt for a week, which gave the killers plenty of time to make their

plans. He was still sore—until he learned that being evicted from the Roosevelt had saved his life. He was more willing to talk then. He admitted being the scout for a Chicago syndicate interested in getting a foothold in Central City by muscling in on the slot-machine concessions and other businesses. When we wouldn't give him permission to leave town, he asked for protective custody. We held him for forty-eight hours while we checked into his activities. When we released him he demanded a police escort to the airport." I chuckled and added, "Those Chicago mobsters aren't as brave as they're made out to be. And, of course, it was impossible to find out who had killed Byron Jacks. Any one of a dozen men we know of could have given the order, and the trigger man could have been anyone. No fingerprints, witnesses, or gun."

Bob Nichols frowned in thought. I watched him. He was shorter than my five feet ten but weighed more than Donald or Billie, who were six feet tall. Doris, sitting beside him, had a secret smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Bob said, "Hmm," now and then at some thought, opened his mouth as though about to say something, then clamped his lips together.

After ten minutes of this, Bob grinned at me suddenly and said, "It's like deducing the nature of a particle from its path through a cloud chamber."

"A what through a what?" I grunted, but he had already retreated back into his thoughts and didn't answer.

The rest of us began eating again. Even Doris. Bob sat there staring into space, saying, "Hmm," now and then. It was awe-inspiring in a way, like watching a Univac would be, maybe. Like Donald said later, "I could almost smell the bakelite and banana oil." You know, like new equipment smells fresh from the factory.

I finished my Swiss steak and wiped my plate clean with a last slice of bread, soaking up the gravy. In our house the garbage man gets only the cans and bottles—on my salary. . . .

Finally I couldn't stand it any more. "Don't you have any questions, Bob?" I asked.

"Huh?" He blinked his eyes like he was waking from a nap. "Questions? Two. Was Byron Jacks from Chicago? Do you know where Joe Brady lives now?"

"Byron Jacks lived in Winnetka, a suburb of Chicago," I said. "Joe Brady lives in a swanky penthouse apartment on Rush Street in Chicago."

Bob nodded. He looked down at his plate and looked surprised, as though just discovering it. Taking a bite of the now cold Swiss steak, he chewed on it, frowned at his water glass and moved it a quarter of an inch.

"Your dinner is cold," Mom said. "Let me warm it for you."

"No. That's all right," Bob said. "The true test of Swiss steak is, is it still delicious when cold? This is even better cold than hot!"

"I've never tried it cold," Mom said doubtfully.

"Have you given up, Bob?" Billy said, winking at me.

"Given up?" Bob said, taking another slice of bread and buttering it. "Oh. I see what you mean. Well, why shouldn't I finish my dinner—now that I know who killed Byron Jacks." He bit into his freshly buttered bread in the startled silence.

I looked at Doris. She was using every ounce of will power to keep from busting out laughing. She was three shades pinker from the effort, and it made her about five shades prettier. I was beginning to see why she had snagged Bob—but a sneaking suspicion was entering my mind that maybe he had snagged her instead! The way he had just pinned Billie's ears back with *Why shouldn't I finish my dinner now that I know who killed Byron Jacks!*

"The only trouble is proving it," Bob added, seemingly oblivious to the undercurrents in the room. He glanced across the table at me. "Are you willing to let me try something?" he asked me. "It would be an experiment in arranging circumstances to trap the murderer."

"I don't know," I said cautiously. "What do you have in mind?"

Bob grinned. "I believe," he said, "that this is where the classic detective in fiction becomes secretive and mysterious."

"You don't want anyone arrested or picked up for questioning?" I asked.

"No. Lord no!" Bob said.

"In that case—why not?" I said. I glanced at Billie, who winked at me and nodded. Billie was thinking the same thing I was thinking—that it was unlikely that Bob actually knew who the killer was. Billie wanted Bob to stick his neck out and make a fool of himself. I had something else in mind. Something entirely different. So I gave Billie a deadpan wink and said to Bob, "Go ahead. I'll play along."

Bob nodded, frowned at Billie, then said to Doris, "Doris, call up the airport and find out when the next plane to Chicago leaves and when it arrives there." He took another bite of Swiss steak and chewed on it as though nothing but food was on his mind, while Doris called the airport.

"How many tickets should I get?" was the only question Doris asked her new husband.

"None," Bob said, drooling a little gravy in the process and wiping it off with his napkin. I began to love that boy!

"Flight five oh nine," Doris called from the phone, "takes off here at seven-twenty and arrives at the Municipal Airport in Chicago at nine-seventeen. It's on time, too."

We all glanced at the clock. It was ten to six. Doris came back to the table and sat down. Bob looked toward me and said, "Can you get the Chicago police to see if Joe Brady meets that plane and follow him if he does?"

"I guess so," I said. "They've always cooperated with me before."

"Find out," Bob said. "I'll pay for the call. And let me talk to them before you hang up. Find out first if they'll cooperate."

"You don't need to pay for the call, Bob," I said half-

heartedly. Then I thought of how he had set Billie back on his heels and added, "No, by golly! This is on me!"

I finally got Lieutenant Wilson on the phone. He was glad to do the favor. I turned him over to Bob.

"There won't be anyone on the plane for him to meet," Bob said on the phone, "but if Joe Brady shows up there, he'll do one of three things. Go back home, in which case you might keep a watch on him for a day or so, take a plane, in which case I hope you can find out his destination and report back to us, or go see somebody, which is what I think he will do. We want to know who he goes to see, and whoever it is, you'd better interrupt him right after he goes in or you might have a murder on your hands." He listened for a minute, then said, "No matter how it turns out, call us here and reverse the charges," and hung up.

I winced and decided I wouldn't refuse if Bob offered to pay for the calls. He probably made more money than I did anyway, and only had Doris to support.

Then Bob looked up a number in the phone book and dialed it.

"Western Union?" he said. "I want to send a straight wire to Joe Brady." He gave the address and phone number I'd given him. "Mr. Brady," he said. "I'll break if I have to take any more of this. Meet me. Flight five oh nine, nine-seventeen tonight, from Central City." Bob listened, then said, "No. He'll know who it is." More listening. "Okay, sign it *Desperate.*" More listening. "Yes, you can call back." He hung up. A few seconds later the phone rang and I took it and okayed the telegram.

"Now," Bob said apologetically, "all we can do is wait."

We waited. Bob Nichols sat restlessly, fussing with his knife, moving his glass of water back the quarter of an inch to where it had been before. Joanne, who usually couldn't wait to get up from the table, showed no inclination to leave. Patricia yawned, then got up and went to the kitchen and came back with the coffee pot—something she had never

done before. Mom winked at me and I winked back. Donald seemed immersed in thought, and since he never thought about anything except cars I knew he must be thinking about Bob's car and how it had sounded when it came up the driveway. You got to know your own kids, so I knew what Donald was going to say when he opened his mouth.

"You and Doris can use my car tomorrow, Bob," Donald said. "I'll drive yours to work in the morning and give it a tuneup."

Billie was dying to ask Bob who the murderer was and how he knew. So was I, though I had a pretty good idea. Bob wasn't as much of an egg head as I'd taken him to be. He had to know a lot more about the Byron Jacks killing than I'd told him. That meant that Doris (who should have been a boy and would have been on the police force if she had been) had kept up on doings in Central City and had filled Bob in on things from the minute she fell in love with him.

I was dying to ask Bob how he figured, myself, but I was damned if I was going to break first. I waited for Billie to break.

Mom started to clear the table, all except the coffee cups.

"Joanne, help your mother," I said, like I always do.

She frowned with annoyance and pouted defiantly like she always did, then got up and helped clear the table.

The ticking of the clock on the fireplace mantel got awfully loud. It was like a pulse beating in the room. It does that sometimes. It's the way it sets, I think. It actually gets louder. Right now it was having an effect on Billie. I knew he was about to break, so I relaxed. Bob caught my eye and winked. It startled me. I suddenly realized he knew the tick of the clock had actually gotten louder and that it was affecting Billie. I suddenly realized Bob was waiting for Billie to break and ask him how he figured!

I also suddenly realized that Bob knew he was in with the family, all except Billie. All his "solving the crime" had

been to play along with Billie and win him over.

"You're going to look awfully silly," Billie sneered, "when it turns out you're all wet. . . ."

Bob grinned. "I've been wrong before," he said, picking up his spoon and examining it closely. "As a matter of fact, on the project I've been working on for the past two years, I've been wrong every time—but over thirty egg heads like me have been working on it, and one of us is bound to be right sooner or later. Then the U.S. has a nuclear ram jet engine that can take a manned missile into outer space." He frowned and seemed to bring his thoughts back to the present. "I don't think I'm wrong now, though."

"How do you figure?" Billie said, the sneer still in his voice. He was advertising that he was going to be hard to sell, which meant that underneath he was reluctantly being sold. Billie had rheumatic fever when he was little, so he's the spoiled member of the family. During the years when he should have been getting whacked on the hind end like the others, we had to coddle him.

The corners of Bob's lips quirked. "Nothing mysterious about it," he said. "Joe Brady killed Byron Jacks."

"Now wait a minute!" I said in spite of my determination to keep my mouth shut and let Billie stick his neck out.

"You think pop doesn't know his business?" Billie said triumphantly.

"Of course he knows his business," Bob said. "So does Joe Brady. He's a professional killer."

"Now we get to it," I said. "What do you know about him that I don't?" I was beginning to see the light. Bob, being in a government project, had intimate contact with the F.B.I. and a lot of their secret files that local law-enforcement agencies don't know about.

"Not a thing," Bob said, toying with his fork. "In fact, I don't know a thing more than you told me. Why did Joe Brady stay in that hotel? So he could set up the murder. Putting myself in his place, I would rent a room at the Roosevelt, put a blue light in one of the table lamps and

place it where the phone is, then go over to the Medical Building and find out the place where I could see that blue light and the telephone. I'd study the whole thing out, including timing myself on getting from the hotel room to that window in the Medical Building.

"Byron Jacks obviously was attending a convention of some sort. The fact that he had a reservation and Joe Brady had to move to another hotel proves that. How Joe Brady maneuvered Byron Jacks into that particular hotel room is a little in doubt, but not much. I would say that Byron Jacks was the last conventioneer to arrive at the hotel, and since Joe Brady stalled until the last minute before giving up his room, automatically Byron Jacks would be the one to get it. Joe Brady probably hung around the desk to make sure it was Byron Jacks who was waiting to get the room, before he consented to check out of the room. The fact that the chambermaid was changing the bed when Byron Jacks took the room indicates that Joe Brady had just left. The maid wouldn't come in until he checked out.

"So all Joe Brady had to do was stop in the lobby long enough to phone whoever had hired him, so that person could phone Byron Jacks and get him to answer the phone and set himself up as a target. Then Joe Brady hurried over to the Medical Building, shot Byron Jacks, and went hunting for another room. It took maybe five minutes. Or the person who called Byron Jacks could be anyone, and say anything. The only object of the call was to get Byron Jacks to the phone, where he could be shot.

"So the person who hired Joe Brady only had to make sure that Byron Jacks was the last conventioneer to reach the hotel, so that Joe Brady's objections to giving up his room would result in Byron Jacks' moving into the same room.

"It isn't anything that can be proved in court. A pro knows all those angles, or he wouldn't be a pro. The only point of attack is the person who hired Joe Brady. The telegram I sent to Joe Brady should point that person out.

Why? Because it came from Central City, because a year has passed since the killing, and because Joe Brady will think the police have been working on the case, bringing this unknown person—this neutron that doesn't leave a visible track in the cloud chamber—into visibility."

"Then you didn't have anything more than what I said to go on?" I asked, unbelievingly.

"Of course not!" Bob said, picking up his knife and examining it closely. "This sort of thing is out of my line, ordinarily. In fact, I might be sorry I got mixed up in it. But damn it!" He scowled.

"Now darling, don't get upset," Doris said to Bob.

"I'm not upset," Bob said petulantly. "I just don't like it." The little boy in Bob was visible. Suddenly I realized that Bob was high voltage, no matter how you looked at him. Even with the little boy showing in his make-up, I felt in awe of him.

It took time for the plane to reach Chicago. I visualized that plane several times, boring through the stratosphere toward Chicago, with X, our neutron, on it. It was the sort of thing an egg head would conjure up to solve a crime—a neutron in a cloud chamber, whatever that was. . . .

Meanwhile we moved to the living room and I found out Bob's taste in alcoholic beverages was bourbon on the rocks. I prefer Chianti, of course, but I felt sort of humble tonight, and drank bourbon on the rocks with Bob, and got slightly drunk. Even if he was all wet, I loved him like a son. I was glad Doris had moved to California and found Bob to marry. He was a fine addition to the family, and if Donald and Billie and Joanne and Patricia did half as well I could die happy when my time came! Maybe I had a little too much to drink.

In fact, I know I did, because once I was crying in my drink and Mom was patting me on the shoulder and saying, "Now John, now John, now John." But it's awfully hard, raising five kids and hoping they turn out right, and seeing

all the kids that didn't turn out right down at the Station. . . .

Anyway, the ringing of the phone sobered me up in a hurry. I looked around and everyone was expecting me to answer it, so I got up and started weaving toward the dining room. Donald came to my rescue and helped me steer my course. He's a good boy, even if he is an automobile mechanic.

It was Lieutenant Wilson of the Chicago Police on the phone. He told me what had happened. I thanked him and hung up, and Donald helped me back to the living room. I sat down.

"Well, pop?" Billie said. Bob Nichols was fussing with his napkin, trying to get it to drape over his knee.

"Brady didn't show up," I said.

Billie snickered, then retreated behind his can of beer when I glared at him. Bob sighed deeply.

"Look, Bob," I said slowly, "who did you think was behind it?"

Bob shrugged, his lips curving down. "Byron Jacks' wife," he said. "That's why I signed the telegram, *Desperate.* A man wouldn't sign that way."

I nodded, then said, "Why did you put in the telegram—*I'll break if I have to take any more of this?*"

"To make Brady think the police had been questioning her," Bob said. "That would worry him because she might break down and tell the police she had paid him to kill her husband. That would force him to meet the plane—but it didn't."

"I see," I said. I went back to the phone and called Lieutenant Wilson in Chicago. "Look," I said when they located him, "find out if Joe Brady made any calls to Central City after six this evening, or sent any telegrams here. Also check on Byron Jacks' widow and see if she's okay."

"Will do," Lieutenant Wilson answered.

I got the dial tone and dialed the direct wire to my

own office, getting Lieutenant McGrory. "Look, Ed," I said, "get out the Byron Jacks file. Something may be cooking. Check any shootings this evening against the names in that file. If you find a connection, let me know. I'll call you later. I'm expecting a call from Chicago that may give something more." I hung up and went back to the living room. They had all heard my end of the phone calls.

"What was that all about?" Billie asked.

I shrugged and busied myself freshening my bourbon on the rocks. I just got comfortable when the phone rang. It was Lieutenant Wilson in Chicago. He gave me a phone number. I thanked him and hung up. Before I could lift the phone, it rang again. It was McGrory.

I listened to what he had to say, then said, "Okay, now check out this phone number and pick up everyone. Check out any guns with ballistics. If that works, we have a tight case."

I hung up and went back to the living room and sat down. I grinned at Bob and picked up my bourbon on the rocks. Bob had a questioning scowl on his face, but he didn't say anything.

I swirled the ice cubes around in my glass and said, "You're okay, Bob. I'm beginning to get a picture of what you do. Your m.o. You take known substances and combine them to make a new substance. You're good at that. Right?"

"That's what I do as a research chemist," Bob said. "But what . . . ?"

"What does that have to do with this?" I said. "Let me ask you something. Do the new substances sometimes have powers you didn't expect?"

"Almost always," Bob said.

"That's what I mean," I said. "You sent a telegram to Joe Brady. You expected it to have a certain effect on him, based on a theory you had. Your theory was one hundred percent wrong, but your telegram was real and had an effect you couldn't predict. You see, not only was Joe Brady

the intended victim of that bullet, he also knew who ordered the bullet, who fired it, and who fingered him. We thought he did at the time, but there was no way we could prove it, or make him talk. All he wanted was OUT. The party that fingered him—put a blue light next to the phone or something—was a girl he got cozy with when he was there. When Byron Jacks got killed, Joe Brady knew the girl had been the finger. He wanted no part of her. When he got your telegram, he thought she had sent it—not Mrs. Jacks, as you expected. He immediately called the man who had wanted him murdered. You see, Brady thought she was coming to Chicago to rat on her boss, or at least be a nuisance to him. The locals got to her before the plane took off. Of course, she denied planning to run out, but who would believe her after the call from Brady? They took her for a ride. She was found a half hour ago in the ditch on U.S. 41. The local boys don't know we have a fix on them, so we may catch them with the gun that did the job. We still won't have solved the Byron Jacks case—technically—but we'll have them cold for the murder of Shadi Dell, a local stripteaser." I chuckled. "Imagine Shadi Dell's surprise when the local hoods showed up at her apartment about six-forty-five and accused her of planning to catch a plane to Chicago. Of course, she denied it, but who would believe her?" I chuckled again, and swirled the ice cubes in my drink. "The timing was perfect!" I concluded.

"You mean my telegram caused the death of . . . ?" Bob said. He was turning green around the gills.

"That's a by-product, you might say, of this experiment in arranging circumstances," I said.

Bob staggered to his feet and started toward the stairway, retching.

It was Billie who leaped up to help him. Billie's always been the sensitive member of the family.

EACH NIGHT HE PULLED THE TRIGGER

Robert Edmund Alter

IT WAS TOWARD the middle of the siege at Dienbienphu when Captain Ortega decided that we had "had it." We were living in underground bunkers and the Spanish officer and I shared quarters. On this certain day he returned from duty in the early evening as he always did, entered our room, nodded stiffly to me, and began divesting himself of field equipment.

Retaining his pistol, he sat down at our cluttered deal table and reached for the wine bottle. "You realize, of course, *compadre,* that we are doomed," he stated, apropos of nothing.

I raised to one elbow to stare at him.

"You really think it is hopeless?"

He made a broad Latin gesture, using his hands in conjunction with his shoulders. "But of course, *amigo.* Oh, we may hold on for a few weeks more, but in the end we shall surrender."

"Well, Juan, after all, that isn't the end. Merely fortunes of war. I doubt if they'll kill us."

He fixed me with shadowy, past-haunted eyes, and said, "You don't understand. You are English. And the English have a peculiar trait which enables them to view their defeats with the same pride as they view their victories. For me there can be no surrender. It is a vow I took nearly eighteen years ago."

He must have been referring to an incident in the Spanish Civil War. Ortega had fought for the Loyalists, and had fled his homeland in '37 to join the Legion. I didn't believe in arguing with any man about his peculiar code of honor, so I said nothing.

He lifted his revolver from its holster and broke the barrel. For a moment he stared at the cylinder with its six little dabs of brass. Then—"Have you ever played Russian roulette?" he asked casually.

"Not for keeps," I replied, smiling.

He seemed annoyed. "Any other way is a waste of time. Is childish."

He emptied the six shells on the table, poked among them with a slender finger, and finally selected one. This shell he replaced in one of the chambers. He snapped the pistol together, spun the cylinder, put the barrel to his right temple.

He pulled the trigger without looking at me.

The harmless click was like a crash of thunder. I leaped a foot.

"Good Lord, man!" I gasped. *"Are you mad?"*

He made a sigh of wearied patience and began reloading his weapon.

"Once a day is enough for this business. It calls for a certain amount of—uh—moral jacking-up to do the trick." He talked to me as though he were a bland military instructor describing a colorless field maneuver.

"I knew a White Russian once," he continued, replacing the pistol in its holster, "who lasted forty-one days at this game. Remarkable, is it not?"

I left my bunk and reached for his hand. "Juan, promise me you'll never do that again."

I couldn't tell whether he took affront to my hand or to my demand. He pulled away with a dolorous look. "Don't be silly. This is entirely my affair." Then he relaxed visibly, smiled, and said in a comforting tone, "Besides, *compadre,* the odds are beautiful. Five to one in my favor. What sensible gambler could ask for more?"

Of course, I made no mention of the incident to our fellow officers that night. I was still too shocked by what I had witnessed to be able to approach the subject in a rational manner. But I had a rotten dream. Ortega was sitting across

the table from me, talking mildly on random subjects as he brought the pistol to his temple for another round of Russian roulette. When he pulled the trigger, the gun exploded, blowing a tunnel through his head, and a broad crimson belt of blood sprang across the room and splattered me from head to toe. And I couldn't move, or speak; could only lie there watching.

The following evening Ortega returned to quarters, stripped his equipment—including pistol—and sat down for a glass of wine. I watched him narrowly.

"One of my men shot a Red today," he said conversationally. "A beautiful five-hundred-yard shot. I saw it with the field glasses."

"We're late," I said. "They'll be waiting at mess."

He nodded and stood up. We washed together and donned our best tunics. Then, as I turned to the door, he snapped his fingers as though he'd almost forgotten something. He went to his holster and drew the revolver, began extracting the shells.

"Juan," I said quietly, "put that thing down."

His rather full lips tightened as he shot a level glance at me.

"*Amigo,* I must really complain about this unseemly attitude you have adopted toward me. We have been fast friends for five years, but that does not give you the right to coddle me. I refuse to be treated as an idiot child." He started to raise the gun.

I leaped at him.

Ortega swiveled adroitly to one side, sweeping his arm backhand against my neck, propelling me half into my bunk. When I regained myself and spun about, he was standing with his back to the door, the pistol barrel to his head. His eyes were glazed with controlled fury.

"I'll have no more of this, Peter!" he said hotly. "I wish for you to remember that I am an officer and a gentleman."

"Juan, for God's sake . . ."

He made a terse, angry shake with his head. "*No.* No

more, do you hear? *Nombre de Dios, hombre,* you try me!"

He pulled the trigger.

We went down to mess together, not a word spoken between us. Nor did we speak again that night.

But the following morning I spoke to our colonel. That stout gentleman in his too tight tunic sat at his narrow desk and alternately constructed and crumpled a finger temple with his hands before his pursed lips as he listened to me with reflective eyes.

When I had finished, the colonel destroyed the temple for the last time, entwining all his fingers into a pudgy two-handed fist and placing the ruin in his lap. He sighed.

"I regret, *mon enfant,*" he said not unkindly, "that there is not a thing I can do . . . not a thing *any* of us can do. It is hard for you, a Nordic, to appreciate a matter of delicacy such as this. Captain Ortega is a Spanish officer and gentleman. This thing of the inevitable surrender and the roulette is without question a matter of honor with him. We dare not interfere."

"But, my colonel, *it is suicide!* Won't you even attempt to restrain the man?"

My colonel snatched up a hand and held it flat before me as a barrier to my protests. "It is *not* suicide!" he objected warmly. "Suicide is a dishonorable act." Then he smiled and took pity on my boorishness, "I deeply regret, *mon ami,* that the blood of your parents will not allow you to understand this simple matter. But such being the case, I will now present the problem in a light that you as a professional soldier will grasp immediately. I hereby *order you* to cease interfering in Captain Ortega's fate."

I left the cramped office with the distinct feeling that my colonel considered all Nordics hopeless barbarians.

I was amazed—shocked, rather—to discover that the officers in our mess (Latins, for the most part) were in sympathy with Ortega and the colonel. During Ortega's absence, they would stand in discreet groups and discuss the situa-

tion in low tones, invariably pinching their chins with thumb and forefinger, making solemn, wise nods, and murmur their appreciation of the delicate matter in their own various tongues or in Legion French.

Only Lieutenant Ludwig Breyer—once a colonel under Rommel—remained stiffly aloof. "What more may a civilized man expect of a Latin?" he said to me disdainfully. "They should all be play-actors!"

But, of course, Vasili Feoklitych, our only officer from the Steppes, was openly enthusiastic. He would follow me about in off moments, flapping his huge hands in an ecstacy of empathy, saying, "Ahhh! Peter! It is not a thing of beauty? It is not touching? Does it not tear your very heart?"

Until finally I had to shout, "You damn fool! It's going to tear his head open!"

Vasili looked at me with startled concern, his expression visibly saying *That you should be so stupid, Peter.* Then, aloud, he bellowed, "But of course! *That is the purpose of the game!*"

Ortega's roulette game did not follow a strict schedule. One day he would have a whack at it immediately upon returning to quarters; the next day he might wait until he'd washed up; sometimes not until after mess, or maybe not at all until time to turn in. One thing only was certain—somewhere between the time he left the line and the time he was ready to retire, he would play a hand with Death.

Usually I was his only witness. Word had spread, of course, and nightly our mess was pressed to entertain officers from other bunkers who seemed to have nothing better to do than to wait around in the anticipation of at least being close at hand when the odds turned against Ortega and he blew out his brains.

And, too, there was a rumor going that bets were being made as to what exact day the sixth shell would finally come up. Naturally we in our bunker would have nothing to do with such a shameful sideline. After all, Ortega was our

friend. However, I was curious enough to do some investigating on my own.

Alone in my room I would sit with my own pistol, unload it and place an empty cartridge shell in the cylinder, give it a spin and try my luck. In the first set I won twelve times before the sixth chamber came up. In the second set the sixth chamber appeared at the fifth spin. In the third I went as high as eighteen before I lost. And there was one very interesting set in which I ran my luck up to thirty-eight, but then I was called away to duty and the set remained inconclusive.

A week dragged by. Seven times Ortega's sixth shell failed to fall under the firing pin. Then the eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh. And on the twelfth night Ortega faltered.

I was stretched on my bunk, as tightly drawn-out as the wire net supporting me and my mattress, watching him. It was shortly after mess and Ortega had just prepared his pistol for the game. He put the barrel to his head . . . and hesitated. I saw his hand tremble.

He lowered the weapon and wiped at his mouth with his free hand.

"I feel that it is very close, *amigo,*" he said simply.

"Why not take a peek?" I suggested.

His hesitation became an uncomfortable wedge of silence between us. I realized that I was suffering in a mixture of conflicting emotions. I certainly did not want to see my friend blow out his brains, and yet it was distressing to see the moral fiber that had brought him so far begin to crumble. It was almost embarrassing.

But he bucked up. With an abrupt shake of his head he raised the pistol and said, "Impossible. It would be cheating."

He pulled the trigger for the twelfth time.

I settled back on my bunk and prepared to go to sleep with the shakes.

On the thirteenth day we received a drop of paratroopers.

The reinforcement didn't actually change our status quo, but merely pushed the inevitable defeat a notch further into the future.

One of the new officers, a Captain Contreras, was assigned to our mess. No one else being handy, I helped pack him in his quarters. He was a very formal Spanish gentleman of forty years, reminding me somewhat of Ortega. And when I mentioned that I bunked with a countryman of his, he unbent enough to ask that countryman's name.

"Captain Ortega."

Contreras turned to me with a quizzical look.

"Captain *Alonso* Ortega?"

"No. Juan Ortega." Then I remember that Spanish gentlemen usually have about five Christian names preceding their surname, and amended, "At least, that is all he goes by on record."

"And this Ortega of yours . . . did he fight in Spain, do you know?"

I confirmed the fact that Ortega had.

Contreras made a slow, deliberate nod and turned back to his kit.

"Well," he murmured, "we shall say no more of it until we meet the gentleman. It is possible he is not the same *hombre.*"

Ortega was the last one to mess that evening. We were seated and employed in the ritual of passing the wine when he entered. Captain Contreras took one look at him, set his glass down, and came to his feet. He looked at the colonel.

"Señor," he said stiffly, "I cannot eat at the same table with Captain Ortega." Then, smoothly, turned back to Ortega, who had stopped dead by his chair, and said, "I accuse Captain Alonso Ortega of cowardice. I accuse Captain Alonso Ortega of desertion in the face of the enemy. I accuse Captain Alonso Ortega of surrendering to the accursed Fascist in order to save his skin."

Lieutenant Ludwig Breyer cleared his throat heavily, and the colonel, with an oblique smile in his direction, said,

"I suggest, Captain, that the Legion is a poor place in which to slander political parties. And further—I have yet to grasp exactly *what war* you are referring to. There have been so many, *mon ami.* And who *is* Captain *Alonso* Ortega?"

Contreras, correct soldier that he was, took everything in its place. First he bowed to Breyer, and said, "My humble apologies, *señor.*" And turning again to the colonel, said, "I refer, *señor,* to the Spanish Civil War. Captain Ortega and I were in the same brigade. On June 19th, 1937, this man, this Ortega, deserted in the face of the enemy at Bilbao. And later that day surrendered himself to the rebels. I defy this man to defend himself!"

All of us turned to stare at Ortega. His face was like dried putty, but he said nothing at all. He made a stiff bow to the head of the table, about-faced himself and marched from the room.

The charges were too absurd for Ortega to even bother himself with a defense. He left that up to those who knew him best. The colonel ran a blunt finger across his pursed lips, staring at Contreras patiently, while the rest of us heaped our protests on the Spaniard. Finally the colonel rapped for order.

"I suggest, Captain Contreras, that you could be mistaken, yes? I further suggest that eighteen years is a long time in which to recall the face of a man you once knew in combat. Is it not possible you have the wrong man?"

Contreras made a complying shrug. "It is possible, *señor,* of course. But I think—in this case—*not.*"

"Hombre," someone called, "you are mistaken without a doubt. Listen to me. This Ortega of ours is no coward. Every day he has been on the firing line. Never has he shown an inclination to run."

"Ah-ha!" Contreras rejoined. "He has been on the line, yes! But has your Ortega met the Reds hand-to-hand? I ask you, *amigo?*"

"Well no, but . . ."

"Válgame Dios, hombre, I swear to you that *if* he does—

if he sees the cold steel coming to him—*he will run!*"

"You suggest, then, that he is afraid to look at death?"

"Afraid!" Contreras wailed the word. "He would rather self-mutilate himself. I tell you I know this one!"

"Captain Contreras," I called. "You consider Russian roulette an honorable game?"

Contreras blinked at me, dubious over the interruption.

"Honorable? But of course it is honorable."

"You consider it risky?"

"Risky? *Sangre de Cristo!* It is the game of death!"

"Then you consider the man who plays this chancy game a gentleman who is not afraid to face death?"

Contreras was marked in his hesitation. He undoubtedly realized by now that he was being led into a trap. But what could he do? He nodded.

We all relaxed into smiles.

"Captain Ortega has been successfully playing Russian roulette for two weeks now," the colonel informed the Spaniard.

Contreras was nonplussed. He felt for his chin and looked around at our smiling faces. "I can hardly believe it," he murmured at last. "I was so certain . . . The man I knew could never do it. Never." He turned to the colonel. "My apologies, *señor,* but I feel bound to confess that I must see it before I can believe."

I pushed my chair back and stood up. "Stick around, Captain. I'm certain that before the night is over, Captain Ortega will accommodate you."

And I was right. I was only halfway along the corridor when I heard the shot.

The force of the slug had knocked Ortega from the chair. He was limp by the table in a curled position. The bullet hole in his right temple was very small and tidy. I didn't turn him over to see what the egress had caused. I knew.

I just had time to pick up his pistol, break it, and look inside when I heard the others pounding down the corridor.

I turned without a word and handed the gun to the colonel as they entered. The colonel glanced at Ortega, then at the naked cylinder.

"Reversed the odds on himself," he muttered. *"Five to one against."* He showed the gun to Contreras. "A regrettable way to prove a point, *mon ami,* but I believe it answers your question? A man afraid to face death does not play Russian roulette *with five loaded chambers."*

Captain Contreras looked sick. "I feel very bad about this," he murmured. "Very bad indeed."

After the body had been removed, after the orderly had cleaned up, I closed the door and went to my locker for my cartridge belt. I took from my pocket the sixth shell—the one I'd removed from Ortega's pistol just before the colonel and the others had reached the room. I put the cartridge in with my own.

After all, Ortega had been a good soldier—ever since Bilbao—and a good friend. I saw no reason for the charge of suicide to go on his record.

THE WAITING GAME

Pat Stadley

THE BOX OF CANDY came at ten-thirty in the morning. I opened the door when I saw the delivery boy, and signed for the package. It was small and brown and it rattled like chocolates and so I said, "Must be candy for my sister. She gets it and I eat it." And then I smiled at him because he had a pleasant-looking face and I always find it easier to smile at the pleasant ones.

There wasn't a mark anywhere on the box, though I looked carefully and then I called Charleen. She drifted in from the pool, Thad trailing after her, and I handed her a towel, along with the candy because, otherwise, she'd stand there, dripping on the Oriental.

You see, Charleen is the last of my five sisters—the other four having conveniently died without too much fuss—a fall from a mountain top for Darleen, a boating accident for Marleen, a bolting horse for Caroleen, and a hunting mishap for Noraleen.

It was really like Father had said. "All my daughters are such simple little kittens, except for two—you, Sherraleen and Charleen. Charleen is a full-grown cat and the clever one, while—well, you're the odd one."

"Oh, but I'm not," I said, "I'm really much more clever than Charleen."

But he only laughed at me and I never did convince him. When he died he left each of us a tidy sum of money, and remembering his words, I sat back and watched. And Charleen *was* clever and maybe I was odd, but after all who wants just a tidy sum when it can so easily be a tidy fortune?

"Here's more candy," I said, casually, "still no name. And dry your feet."

Charleen took the box eagerly, her slim fingers tearing off the paper. "Isn't it exciting," she said to Thad, "someone keeps sending me the candy—this is the third box—and he never puts his name on it."

Thad scowled. He always scowls when Charleen mentions another man. I'd think he was a fortune hunter except that his father owns fifty oil wells.

"How do you know it's a he?" he asked.

Charleen arched her eyebrows at him and wiggled her hips. She does a very effective job. It's the only course she completed in four years of finishing school.

"Well, pass the candy around," I said.

She gave me a sharp little look from under her long, golden lashes and pouted. "You ate all of the last box!" she accused. "Besides, with your weight problem, you shouldn't eat candy, as if I had to tell you that."

"And that's why," I explained to Detective Barrows, when the doctor called him late that night, "I never even sampled a piece."

"Good thing," he said, "that candy was loaded with enough arsenic to have wiped out half the town."

"She's going to be all right?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said shortly. "A stomach pump's pretty thorough."

I let him prowl the house, poking his nose here and there, and even gave him the wrapping paper from off the candy box.

He stood there reading it and then he looked at me. His face wasn't at all pleasant. "Well, it was addressed to her, definitely, so they didn't mean it for you."

"It must have been a practical joker," I said. "Everyone loves Charleen!"

"Well, evidently someone has stopped," he answered and he went out the door without even a good-bye.

It was a week later when the power steering went out on Charleen's new, bright red convertible. Our house sits high on a hill and the driveway curves down between a long row of tall palm trees that our great-grandfather planted. Charleen always drives like she's handling a jet and even at night she usually hits fifty halfway down the hill. There's a gentle curve right there and this is where the tie-rod snapped.

But Charleen has excellent reflexes. Seconds before she hit the tree, she'd rolled herself in her fur coat and when the engine went through the firewall, she was curled up on the seat in a tight ball.

Detective Barrows all but moved in with us then. I'd never seen such a persistent worker. He dug up the men in Charleen's love life, and lined them up like wooden soldiers.

I think Thad was horrified to find he was number 33. I consoled him as much as possible, but he hung around Charleen with his wounded heart showing like a red badge.

Charleen was bored. Nothing tires her so much as an old love affair. As for the two attempts on her life, well, it was like she said, smiling up at Detective Barrows, "I've got seven lives left, you know," and she laughed in that intimate lower-tone register. I could see Barrows going down for the count.

Charleen had never had a policeman in love with her before, and it fascinated her. But it made me nervous, because he never quite forgot he was a policeman, and I'd find him prowling the library and reading letters and sniffing through the kitchen canisters. I finally took my diary and burned it, and when I found him poking through the ashes, I laughed right out loud.

He went away at last, officially that is, but he was still around romantically—number 34 on Charleen's list.

But I will say this for Thad. He never gave up and he did have fifty oil wells.

We gave a big party the last weekend in August. We

invited everyone we could think of, knowing they'd bring just as many more. Charleen always leaves the details to me while she plays hostess. She really scintillated that evening, and while I made sure the ice buckets were filled with champagne and the tables laden with food, she floated from group to group, her passage noted by everyone in the room.

It was during this time that she drank the glass filled with a martini loaded with strychnine. And if Detective Barrows hadn't been glued to her side from the beginning, she would have gone out on her third life.

But he had an inhalator squad waiting down the hill, and they were there in two minutes.

"Third time's a charm," I said to Barrows, "you'd better work faster."

He only looked at me.

The fourth and fifth times, nobody was sure. A car swerved at her when she was crossing a street. It missed and Barrows said the driver was probably drunk, and then, Arroge, her horse, threw her when he shied at something white in the bushes.

It was October when Thad cooked up the hunting trip. There were five couples, not that I was with anyone particularly, but since both Thad and Barrows were escorting Charleen, I kept it even.

Hunting is one sport I really like. Father taught me how to center five shots, each touching the other. He worked with Charleen, too, but she invariably missed with the first shot.

We drove out to the camp in different cars. I was last because I was bringing out the food, and when I got there, only Thad was waiting. He was sitting on a stump looking very glum.

"They're up on the north shore," he said when he saw me. "We're supposed to play dog." And then he got up and tramped off.

I'm used to playing dog on a deer hunt, so I took up my rifle and started out. It was very hot and when I passed the

station wagon I saw Charleen's light blue jacket hanging on the door, so I took off my own heavy suede and picked up hers.

I was working my way up toward the north shore, taking an old familiar back trail, watching for a deer run, when the first shot went over my head. But not very far over. I heard it sing as it passed. I fell flat, rolled in the weeds, one movement ahead of the second shot and then found a log and, behind it, water. I swam a long way on the bottom until I saw weeds and then I came up just far enough to breathe air.

I lay hidden until I heard voices calling along the trail and I could come out. Everybody stood staring at me while I wrung the water out of my clothes. I must have looked awful, because Barrows was acting very disturbed. Charleen began laughing.

"It's not so funny," I said and pointed to the hole in her blue jacket, "because there went your sixth life."

She stopped laughing then, and put a hand out toward Barrows, but Thad took it and scowled at me.

As for Barrows, he had a funny light in his eyes and he was just like a policeman again, prowling around the weeds and sighting along the deer run until I told him I was cold and he could look for clues by himself. He took me home then.

I waited for Charleen, and when Thad brought her home, I shooed him out and then I said to her:

"Well, you really pulled a boner this time."

"Whatever do you mean?" she said and her blue eyes widened.

"Oh, your scheme was clever enough. And if you had killed me, everyone would have thought it was a case of mistaken identity. Only you missed, and now you've crossed me off Barrow's list as number one suspect, and much as he hates to admit it, that only leaves you."

She frowned a little.

"Of course," I said slowly. "I could tell Barrows about the little mishaps to all the others."

She pouted a bit and then she shrugged her shoulders. "Well?" she said.

"It's really quite simple. Just forget your half of Father's money and Barrows will get no help from me."

She didn't like it at all, but there wasn't much else she could do. And then, just as I knew she would, she married Thad and all those oil wells.

As for me, I'm just sitting back and waiting, because with Charleen's flair—well, she'll make a lovely and wealthy widow. And after all, I *am* her only closest living relative.

Odd, did you say? Not a bit. Don't all things come to those who wait?

DESTRUCTION IS ALWAYS ARRANGED

Gilbert Ralston

ARCHER ENTERED the little shop, the ting of the door chime almost covered by the ticking of the clocks lining the shelves upon the walls. The room was small and softly dark, only the hands of the seated man at the high bench at the end of the room appeared to be illuminated by the light from a gooseneck lamp. He crossed the room, waiting patiently while the spatulate fingers of the workman maneuvered a tiny cog into the jeweled bed of a clockwork mechanism, after which the piece was placed precisely in the center of a square of cloth. Then one of the brightly illumined hands moved to the edge of the bench to touch a switch, flooding the room with light.

Shrugging the loupe out of his eye, the fat man stared at him impassively, his bulbous eyes wetly intent. "May I be of service?" he said, the words precise, the tone musical, touched faintly with accent.

"Daggett sent me," Archer said.

The fat man sat unmoving, not a muscle indicating that he had heard.

"He said to give you this." Archer reached into the pocket of his jacket, placing a torn piece of pasteboard on the bench.

The man reached into a drawer, then neatly fitted the torn half of Archer's card into a matching half, laying the two pieces on the bench without comment. After a moment's examination, he heaved his blocky figure off the stool to cross to the door of the shop, which he closed and locked, turning again to face the younger man. "You may call me Jaeger," he said. "Come." He led the way through a door set in the back wall, to a richly furnished living room,

sumptuous leather pieces harmonizing with a muted Oriental rug. "Be seated, Mr. Archer."

"You know my name?"

"Yes." Jaeger was dialing the telephone, turning his gaze once again to his visitor, holding the stare unblinkingly while he awaited a response. "Describe Archer," he said into the receiver, his eyes flicking over Archer's body as he received the information. "Hold out your right hand, Mr. Archer. I wish to see your ring."

"You're very careful," Archer said, holding out his hand.

"Very," Jaeger replied, cradling the phone. "Do you like music?" He indicated the neat rows of phonograph records near the console across the room.

"Yes."

"It is the only reality," Jaeger said, crossing to the wall. "Schubert?"

Archer nodded.

The swelling strains of the Second Symphony filled the room.

"I will turn it low. Then we can talk." Jaeger sat, folding himself into one of the leather chairs. "No unnecessary details, Mr. Archer, and no names. The address, the layout of the building, what you want done, and when. Nothing more." Unconsciously his right hand beat time to the music as Archer took some papers from his pocket.

"Here's a drawing of the interior of the house. A photo of the outside."

"Expertly done," Jaeger said, his lips pursing a little as he studied the blueprint.

"I am an architect."

Jaeger fixed him with a steady gaze. "I know," he said.

"The address of the house is on that envelope. Here are the keys."

"Neighbors?"

"None nearby. The house rests on a cliff overlooking the ocean on a seven-acre plot."

"It is tenanted?"

"Not at present."

"Why don't you sell it?"

"My father left it to me when he died a year ago. The restrictions of the will do not permit a sale."

"But you may collect insurance?"

"Yes."

"A stone house. Slate roof. Awkward. You wish a total loss?"

"Yes. A total loss."

"Do you have gas in the house?"

Archer nodded.

"Show me where the gas line is."

Archer pointed to a closet leading off the living room. "It comes in here at the back of this closet, branches off to the kitchen at the back, another branch of the pipe through the wall to the fireplace in the living room."

"There is a cellar?" Jaeger asked.

"No. The house is on a concrete slab."

"The interior walls?"

"Brick or stone, for the most part."

Jaeger looked up at him. "It's not an easy problem. We shall have to blow it up."

"Yes," Archer said.

"To blow it up is easy. To simulate an undetectable gas explosion is an art."

"That's why I am here."

"My service is expensive, Mr. Archer."

"How expensive?"

"Five thousand dollars . . . in advance."

"Twenty-five hundred now and twenty-five hundred more when the job is done."

Jaeger made a little deprecating gesture with his hands. "All. Now," he said. "In cash."

"How will you do it?" Archer asked.

"First the money." Jaeger crossed to the phonograph. "Delius?" he asked politely.

Archer reached for the envelope in his jacket pocket,

opened it, and tossed it on the coffee table beside the chair.

"Listen to this," Jaeger said. "It soars to the skies." He counted the money methodically, placing the bills in little piles in front of him, a thousand dollars to a pile. "This is music, too," he said.

"Now tell me how you will do it."

"It is necessary that I tell you. I shall need your help."

"My help?"

"You must prepare the house according to my instructions. Also, there are some supplies that I will need. You will buy them, thus making yourself accessory before the fact." The thick lips twisted into a smile. "*My* insurance policy."

"I didn't agree to that."

"Your money is on the table. Take it and go."

Archer hesitated. "What would you want me to do?"

"You will close the house up tightly, leaving the furniture and personal effects intact."

"What else?"

"You will discreetly purchase a case of dynamite and an ordinary automobile storage battery, leaving them on the closet floor."

"Dynamite?"

"You are an architect. You will know where to buy it or where to have it bought."

Archer studied the bland face before him. "I'll do it, Jaeger."

"I'll be there Thursday night at eleven-thirty."

"Does it take long?"

"Only long enough to attach a small device to the gas pipes in the closet."

"When will it happen?"

"At twelve o'clock the following day. Exactly."

"Do you wish to inspect the house?"

"That will not be necessary. I have your excellent plans. Every moment I am there is dangerous for me—and you. I enter—devote ten minutes to the work—then go."

"What should I do?"

"Stay in town. Conduct yourself normally. After you have prepared the house."

"Will you need tools?"

"Nothing. A roll of tape. I'll bring it."

Archer rose to leave. "It is all arranged, then?"

"All arranged, Mr. Archer."

The swirling strains of Debussy sang around him as he left the shop.

Two days later, at exactly eleven-thirty, Jaeger puffed his way up the graveled drive to the darkened house, carefully placing his feet on the hardened edge of the roadway, stopping now and then to obliterate the occasional footprint left in a softer spot. Slowly and patiently he made his way, the sound of the surf on the strand beneath the cliff covering the crunch of his approach.

The house, low and massive, was held in a hand of protecting rock at the top of the cliff, only the seaward side exposed to the pressure of the wind. Jaeger stepped onto the concrete lintel of the doorway, stopping to stab the light of his flashlight over the shuttered windows, grunting his approval when he found them carefully closed. Fumbling in his pocket with his gloved hand, he found the key and opened the door, pausing for a moment, after closing the door behind him, to feel the silence of the interior. Quickly he oriented himself, the beam of his light moving across the landward wall of the living room with the great stone fireplace set in its center, the bookshelves, a few pieces of heavy furniture, the beams of the massive roof leading to the seaward side of the room, whose picture windows were shuttered. There were no other windows in the room, those on the seaward side, at their highest point, were furnished with transoms for ventilation. The door to the closet in the farther wall was opened, rows of liquor bottles just visible in its dark maw.

Swiftly he crossed to it, his light exposing an opened card-

board box on the floor of the closet. Sticks of dynamite were in the box and a storage battery close beside it. From his pocket he took the timing mechanism, a coil of wire, two blasting caps. Removing his gloves, he took a penknife from another pocket and cut into one of the sticks of dynamite, placing the caps delicately, taping the armed stick of explosive to a bundle of the others, fastening the whole to a gas pipe on the floor.

With infinite care he wired the assembly, leaving one pole of the timer unattached while he rechecked the circuit. He glanced at his watch again, set the timer, then dropped to his knees before the door to make the last connection. Satisfied, he then turned to the door with his handkerchief, wiping the inside edge free of possible fingerprints, closing it carefully and rubbing the outer surface clean, the closing of the latch making a soft click in the silent room.

His hands gloved again, he crossed to the foyer, a sigh of regret escaping him as his light flashed across a large collection of records, on shelves beside a closet. He turned to twist the knob of the front door, surprised to find that it continued to revolve in his hand. Annoyed, he fished in his pocket for the key, trying to insert it in the keyhole above the knob, cursing softly when it refused to enter. He tried the door again, giving it a closer scrutiny, damning for all time the makers of the lock, leaning his weight against the knob, his final wrench pulling it off in his hand. The spot was bare where the knob had left it, nothing behind it except the steel sheathing of the door, two small holes showing where the knob had been attached. He used the screwdriver blade of his knife to unscrew the lock plate. That too was false, the door behind it innocent of space for a key to enter, only the outside keyhole functional.

For a moment he stood there, the pieces of the lock held in his hands, then he tossed them aside and crossed the floor to the kitchen door, only to find it locked solid in its frame. Slowly he flipped the light around, bringing it to rest

on the closet door. He walked to it, holding his hand in the air for a moment before he touched the knob, knowing that it too would turn without resistance.

Archer, he thought, angrily, bitterly. Archer . . .

He returned to the foyer, to the wall switch and flooded the room with light, planted his big bulk in the chair near the window to collect his thoughts, unhurried in his analysis of the problem. Jaeger was a professional, adjustable to change, able to think without emotion. For a moment he put aside the "Why?" of the effort to trap him, beginning a systematic search of the room. The fire irons had been removed from their hooks beside the mantelpiece, the grate and logs removed as well, the marks of the grate legs still visible on the fireplace floor. He tested the wall around the fireplace, turning his attention elsewhere when he realized that it was solid stone, the rough rocks composing it seated solidly in cement. The wall nearest the door was equally solid, the bookcases set into the cement and stone with wooden braces bolted to the walls. He made a mental note of the bolts, realizing that almost every sizable piece of metal had been removed from the room.

A stone box, he thought. Steel doors. The floor placed over a concrete slab, only the plastered ceiling vulnerable, perhaps the shuttered windows. He tried the crank which opened the shutters to the sea, another which controlled the high transoms. Jerking the crank handles out of their sockets, he examined them, to find them neatly cut, the end which engaged the turning mechanisms carefully removed. The window glass was shatterproof, embedded in the metal sills, a heavy grille evident between the glass and the shutters, bolted anchors holding the grille to the stone casements.

Turning again, he ticked off the list of furniture in the room: the massive desk, two leather easy chairs, a solid sideboard against the wall, three straight chairs, a sofa, an upright piano in the corner, the drapes, a small coffee table with a marble top, various pieces of ceramic bric-a-

brac. There were no lamps. His eyes moved to the plastered ceiling, examining it inch by inch, giving a grunt of satisfaction when he saw that it could be reached from the floor at its lowest point, which was along the fireplace wall.

There was little in the room to use for tools, except for the shortened shutter handles, or perhaps the ceramic pieces whose broken shards might be used to pry or scrape. He glanced at his watch again. Ten and a half hours left. First, the door to the closet—one hour. If that effort failed, thirty minutes each for the others. Two and a half hours total. There would be eight hours left. One hour spent against each of the other three walls, five hours remaining for the ceiling.

The closet door frame was fitted with a metal flange designed to cover the cracks of the four edges of the door, the hinges of the door were internal, the hinge pins impossible to reach from the living room. With the screwdriver blade of his knife, Jaeger tried turning back the edge of the metal rim near the lock area of the door. Patiently he worked around the flange, scraping off the grained paint deep enough to know that the tools he had were ineffectual, that the flange spring steel was too strong to turn, and that the door was of heavy metal.

He stood back a little from the door, suddenly heaving his great bulk at it, striking it solidly with his shoulder, then testing it to see if it had given way. He checked the room again, searching for an article of furniture which could be used as a battering ram. The leather chairs were bulky, too heavy to handle practically, the straight chairs comparatively fragile. He carried one of them to the front of the house, carefully smashing it on the step leading to the foyer, placing the broken pieces of it aside, not knowing quite how to use them.

He spent some time examining the entrance door, turned to the kitchen and bedroom doors, to which he gave a lesser amount of time, finding them seated in the same sort of flange encountered at the closet. Jaeger was panting from his

efforts, his coat had been laid on the sofa, sweat was running down the front of his shirt. For the first time, he was conscious of fatigue, thirst began to bother him. He glanced at his watch, deliberately forcing himself into a chair to rest.

After a time, he rose to try the windows, his tongue wandering over his drying mouth and lips. Grunting with the effort, he picked up one of the heavy chairs, driving one of the legs into the window. He was shocked to find that it resisted his attack. He tried again, bringing the chair around in a clumsy arc, the rebound throwing his overbalanced body to the floor, consuming him in a fiery streak of pain which rushed up his arm and shoulder. He was furious with rage when he picked himself up off the floor, trying every portable object in the room against the glass, finally, ignoring the shock of pain which tore up his arm and wrist, he battered the window with a solid ceramic dish until a jagged hole made entrance of his arm possible. He felt the bars in front of it, shook them savagely, knowing that even if he managed to batter the rest of the window down, he could never get around the steel bars between him and the shutters.

Jaeger was bone-tired now, his arm throbbing painfully. He checked his watch again, sitting for a long time, one hand rubbing injured arm and wrist, the racing minutes ticking by.

Finally, he arose and shoved the desk against the landward wall, placing a chair against it to serve as a step. Taking a broken chair leg in his hand, he reached up to scratch the ceiling, a vast sigh of relief escaping from him when a sandy handful of plaster came down in his face. Dropping to the floor, he placed another chair on the desk, forcing his injured and aching arm to function. He was angry with himself for not having chosen the ceiling as his first point of attack. He stood first on the chair that was on the floor, then stepped to the desk to work from that position, then stood on the seat of the chair that he had placed on the desk. The speed with which the plaster fell pleased

him. He scraped methodically, first through the whitecoat, then through the material beneath it, exposing a portion of the metal lath. He tried the strength of the lath, punching the broken chair leg up against it, hitting it again and again with the end of the stick, and, finally, with his bloody fist.

"Cement," he said. "Cement between the joists." Wearily, he descended to the floor, his face working, tears of frustration pouring down his cheeks. Suddenly enraged, he rushed the closet door, smashing into it with such a thudding crash that he was bounced grotesquely to the floor. His head spinning, his mouth making little inarticulate cries of rage, he rushed to the window again and pounded at it in a frenzy, finally sinking in a futile heap upon the floor.

There were thirty minutes left. In the closet, two small metal arms crept closer and closer toward a contact.

Perhaps it will not work, Jaeger thought. But he knew it would.

Six miles and a number of city blocks away, Daggett's ferret face was wary in the dim light of the bar. Motioning Archer to a seat, he poured a shot of whiskey in a glass. "Here," he said.

Archer reached for the drink.

"Sit here. I'll be back."

Archer's eyes went to the clock while Daggett poured some drinks for a handful of noisy customers nearby.

"Couldn't sit it out alone?" Daggett whispered as he returned.

Archer shook his head.

"What time's the fireworks?" Daggett said.

"Twelve o'clock. In a quarter of an hour."

"Play it cool. There won't be any problems. Jaeger doesn't make mistakes."

Archer's voice was barely audible. "He made one."

"When? Where?"

"Last year. When he torched the clothing store."

"Who told you that?"

"How do you suppose I got your name, Daggett? You set 'em up. He does the work. The client collects the insurance."

Daggett leaned across the bar. "You're nervous, boy. You better watch your mouth."

"There was a fire chief killed in that store fire."

Daggett's hands clawed at the bar top. "You trying to shake me down?"

"No. Just thought you ought to know. The man who was killed was my father."

"Why, the fire chief's name was Stimson."

"I know. That's my name, too. Archer Stimson."

Daggett stared in horror. "And you mean to say you hired Jaeger to do your job?"

"A job's a job," Archer replied.

Daggett jerked around to look at the clock.

"That's it," Archer said. "Twelve o'clock."

"Well, I'll be damned," Daggett said, after a moment. "Now I've heard 'em all. Have one on the house."

"One on the house," Archer replied, as he threw the glass of whiskey straight in Daggett's face.

"You're crazy," Daggett said. "Crazy."

Archer stood solidly before him for a moment, then calmly turned to go.

"Wait a minute!" Daggett hissed. "Tomorrow you'll be up to your neck in insurance investigators. You talk, and you'll go up, too."

"There won't be an insurance investigation," Archer Stimson said. "I canceled the insurance on my father's house a week ago." He turned, and walked into the sunlit street.

THE HAPPY DEATH

John Cortez

IT IS NOT GOOD to die sad or alone," the *viejo* said. "Summon them, Teresina, my family, that I may have them all about me as I leave this mortal life."

"We are going to have to suffer through that again?" Teresina asked in a tone of disgust. "This is the fifth time in a year that you have announced you are about to die."

The old man coughed and then shifted his position on the blankets to avoid the dripping from the new leak in the roof. The winter rain was a soft patter on the old house. Outside, the California day was gray with mist and gloom.

"How you abuse me." Moisture filmed the *viejo's* eyes, his white mustachios quivered. "You who are the wife of my only son, to whom I have always been most kind and generous and—"

"Hah! You have been a drunkard and a thief and a nuisance. It is you who abuse me." She stopped stirring the kettle of beans and dipped out a spoonful to taste. Several beans spilled to the floor and Juanito, the youngest, who still crawled, made his way to them and one by one stuffed them in his mouth with gusto. Seeing this, Teresina carefully dropped several more beans on the floor. "You are not going to die. You will outlive us all."

"How you mock me." The *viejo* shifted position quickly to avoid a sudden rill of raindrops. "Is it much that I ask? That my family be summoned? Will you go fetch them for me, Dulces? Be a good—"

"Are you insane?" Teresina twitched her hefty shoulders angrily. "Dulces has but two years and it is raining without."

"Amparo?" the *viejo* asked beseechingly.

Amparo sat in a far corner, reading. She did not lift her eyes.

Teresina made a low, tired sound. "Always with the magazines of the moving pictures. She has time for nothing else. Such a daughter I have raised."

"Pepe?" the *viejo* asked.

"He is with Román over to the Señor McManus. There is a truck that must be repaired of the brakes. The Señor McManus declares that Pepe is very skillful in the repairing and adjusting of the brakes."

"And Doroteo and Alfredo?"

Teresina emitted a sound of surrender. "You will not give up, will you, *obstinado,* stubborn?" She waddled over to the door and stuck her head out. "Alfredo! Doroteo! Fetch your father and Pepe! For your grandfather. The usual."

From the creek, where they were fishing, came the boys' faint shouts. "Hooray! Grandpapa is dying again. We will go instantly."

Teresina turned and waddled back to the stove. The *viejo* lay back on the blankets and closed his eyes and sighed happily. . . .

The *viejo's* eyes brimmed with tears, great emotions clashed within his breast. "It is so good, it is so fine," he said, "to see all my family here about me. So good of you to come also, Señor Jeem. You provide my Román with a job, his wife and little ones with a home. I shall smile down upon you every day from heaven."

Carefully, with trembling fingers, the *viejo* opened the cigar box which he had beside him. "My dearest possessions. My worldly goods. For you first, Juanito. This ring. From my grandfather and his grandfather before him, I give—"

"From the store of the ten cents," Teresina interrupted. "Fool. He will swallow it. Give it here, at once."

"As you wish, dear Teresina. For you, Dulces, this lovely brooch, from my grandmother and her grandmother, a gift from the governor of—"

"Also from the store of the ten cents," Teresina broke in again. "Hand it here or she will pinch herself."

The *viejo* sighed. "Alfredo, Doroteo. For each of you a *cuchillo,* a knife, from the days when I rode with Villa, as a sergeant. I carried them in the battle of—"

"The last time you died, Grandpapa," Alfredo said, "you were a corporal."

"I am old," the *viejo* said. "I grow confused. Once I was a corporal, true, but then I was promoted, to sergeant, for saving Villa's life at Columbus. I—"

"Was it not at Guererro that you saved his life?" Doroteo asked.

"At both places. Pepe. My eldest grandson. The image of your father. This sash. From the presidential palace in Ciudad Mexico when I was Villa's lieutenant."

"Was it not the palace of the governor of Chihuahua?" Pepe asked.

"I grow faint. Memory dims," the *viejo* said. "Do not mock your grandpapa. My time is short. Amparo."

Teresina had to shout the name before the girl stirred and then put her magazine aside and came over slowly, sullenly, to where the family was grouped about the old man. She had the early ripeness and roundness of Mexican girls, and dark, liquid eyes and full, red lips.

"Amparo. This string of pearls. It is said they graced the throat of Carlotta when Mexico had an Empress. I—"

"They give away better in boxes of crackerjack," Amparo said boredly.

The *viejo's* eyes brimmed. "So be it. The last of my worldly possessions. To you, Román, my son, and to you, dear Teresina, I can give only my blessing."

"You will be all right, Papa," Román said, caressing the *viejo's* hand. He turned to McManus. "The rain, the cold, the gloom of the days. They always affect him thus."

"Maybe he needs a doctor," McManus said. "Maybe medicine."

"He will be all right," Román said.

The *viejo* coughed and cleared his throat. "It is said that a little wine, boiled, is good for certain disturbances of the blood. Just a few spoonfuls. Heated."

McManus grinned, but the *viejo*—whose glance was still sharp—noted that the humor did not reach McManus's eyes. "If you'll send Pepe back with me, Román, I'll give him a gallon. I've got more wine than I can use."

"You are so kind, Señor Jeem," the *viejo* said. "I, Eladio Garza, would like very much to repay you. Is there not something I can do?"

A shadow darkened and hardened McManus's face, the gray eyes looked into the distance. "Thank you, Eladio, but I need nothing." He rose and, accompanied by Pepe, left the room.

Rain pattered on the roof. Juanito began to squall and then Dulces followed his example. Amparo wandered back to her magazine, Doroteo and Alfredo began tossing the knives at the wall. Román hunkered on his heels and stared at the *viejo*.

"He is a good man, the Señor Jeem," the old man said. "Do you, perchance, know of what troubles him, Román?"

"There is one who comes to the ranch now and then. *Un malo hombre,* a wicked man, for he brings nothing but unhappiness to the Señor McManus. After every visit, the Señor McManus grows sad and grim. He and his wife do not smile. They sit with long faces."

The *viejo's* eyes narrowed. "Have you no idea why these visits should desolate the Señor Jeem as they do?"

Román spread his hands. "Who knows? An old enmity? A feud of the blood."

Amparo looked up from her magazine, eyes shining excitedly. "It is perhaps like that which I saw once in the motion pictures. There is this man who knows some evil secret about the hero and demands much money, to remain silent and so—"

"It is well for you to remain silent," the *viejo* reprimanded. "Also, Amparo, this is talk for your elders."

Amparo pouted and returned to her reading.

"Is there no other reason you can think of?" the *viejo* asked Román.

Román shook his head.

For a long while the *viejo* stared up at the ceiling, while thoughts sped through his mind. Then something roused him and brought him up on an elbow.

"Hark. Is that Pepe? With my wine? Such a good boy. When I am in heaven I shall smile down upon him every day."

The morning sun could not be seen through the mist which hovered overhead. The drenched earth steamed. The creek which flowed not far from the house was swollen and noisy with the rushing accumulation of the week-long rain.

The *viejo* sat on the stoop with a fruit jar half-full of wine beside him and watched Jim McManus cross the bridge over the creek which was all but overflowing its banks. McManus grinned and waved a hand when he spied the *viejo,* but the *viejo* noted that the worry still lurked in McManus's eyes. Dark wrinkles lay under them as though McManus had not slept the night before. Compassion filled the *viejo.*

"How goes it, Eladio?" McManus said. "Did the wine do you well?"

"The blood of a youth surges in my veins this morning," the *viejo* said, "but the legs are still those of an old man. *Gracias,* Señor Jeem, for the kindness of the wine. If I could but repay you. I grieve."

McManus stared down at the *viejo.* "There is no need, Eladio. We are *amigos,* friends. What are *amigos* for, if not to do kindness without pay?"

"True," the *viejo* said, nodding. "Still, I would like to repay if there were some way."

McManus clapped the *viejo* on the shoulder. "Do not

trouble yourself with such thoughts, Eladio. Your friendship is payment enough for me." He started off.

The *viejo* watched McManus go. Then the old one shifted to a spot on the stoop that seemed warmer. Dulces toddled around the house and took a drink of the wine. Teresina, from the door, saw. Her voice brimmed with righteous anger.

"*Borrachón,* drunkard! Is it not enough that you set a bad example? Must you also make my precious little Dulces into a drunkard like yourself?"

The *viejo* shook the fruit jar. "It is empty," he said sadly. "Fetch me another, please, Teresina?"

"Fetch it yourself," Teresina snapped and turned back inside the house. From within her voice came a steady, irate murmur itemizing all her burdens and complaints.

Amparo appeared in the doorway; then sat down beside the *viejo.* "It is truly bad, Grandpapa, about the Señor McManus?"

The *viejo* sighed. "I fear it is. I have been thinking. It must be as you said last night, a matter of paying much money to the *malo hombre.*"

Amparo's eyes widened. "What do you think will happen? Will he lose his ranch and we our home?"

"There is the possibility."

"Is there not anything at all that can be done?"

"If the good Lord were to send a lightning bolt to strike the *malo hombre,* if the earth were to open and swallow him, if— What approaches, Amparo? My eyes this morning are full of sun."

Amparo giggled. "More full of wine you mean." She sobered under the *viejo's* stern, indignant look. "It is a car." She jumped to her feet. "Such a car."

The car, a gleaming red and white sedan, came down the hill and stopped on the far side of the creek. A man got out and walked ahead to examine the rickety bridge. After awhile, he began to walk across. Boards creaked and trembled. Churning water rushed underneath. The stranger

came on toward the *viejo* and Amparo, flashing a gold-toothed grin.

"That bridge won't support much more than my weight," the stranger said. He gazed with frank admiration at Amparo. The *viejo* belched, groaned and placed a hand beneath his heart. "What's the matter with him?" the stranger asked.

"I am dying," the *viejo* said.

"He dies quite regularly," Amparo explained. "This is the fifth instance this year. Pay no attention to him. The time to worry is when he is not dying."

"Oh," the stranger said, but the look on his pink, heavy face was puzzled. He brightened as he turned his eyes back on Amparo. "I'm looking for McManus."

The *viejo* sat up quite straight. "I did not catch your name, *señor.*"

"Sam Butler."

The *viejo* nodded politely. "I would rise and shake hands, Señor Butler, but as you can see I am dying."

The stranger turned to Amparo. "Look, honey, is McManus around?"

Amparo looked at the *viejo,* who turned his eyes heavenward and shrugged. *"Si,"* Amparo said. "Up on the hill. Mending the fence. See?"

The stranger looked to where Amparo pointed. His hand dropped with exaggerated casualness on her hip. "Thanks a lot, honey. See you later maybe, huh?"

Amparo giggled. The stranger left. The *viejo* sighed his weary sigh. "That Señor Butler. A bad one. Poor Señor Jeem. My heart bleeds. I grieve. . . ."

The *viejo* lay back against the stoop with his eyes closed. The white mustachios quivered each time he exhaled. The fruit jar, emptied again, lay toppled on its side. But the *viejo* was not sleeping. He heard footsteps approaching, their pause as someone stared down at him, then their moving on.

When all was silence except for the squalling of Juanito within the house, the *viejo* stirred and sat up and studiously observed the tableau on the far side of the creek. Leaning against a crimson fender of the sedan was Amparo and close, very close, to her was the stranger.

The *viejo* could not hear what was being said, but Amparo giggled and laughed often. Now and then the stranger put a hand on her, but Amparo expertly swayed and curved out from under it and then as skillfully swayed back within reach again. The *viejo* watched, his face a mask, and once nodded faintly. Then his eyes began to droop. Dulces came and tipped the fruit jar to her mouth and whimpered at its emptiness.

The sound of a starting motor brought the *viejo's* eyes open once again. The car had difficulty turning around in the narrow confines between the bottom of the slope and the creek. The ground was wet and the tires slipped and spun. The *viejo* held his breath, waiting for the car to roll into the water, but the stranger got out of his difficulty and finally started back up the hill.

Amparo returned, walking proudly. "He has made a date with me, Grandpapa. He is to come for me tonight."

The *viejo* grunted.

"Are you not going to say anything?"

"Go to the house of the Señor Jeem and fetch more wine."

"Is that all you can say?"

"Fetch the wine. *Pronto!*" There was anger in the *viejo's* tone, the hint that he would tolerate no disobedience. Amparo shrugged and started for the bridge.

Amparo wore her good dress, the red one which she had washed and pressed that day. The *viejo* thought the bright color went very well with the darkness of Amparo's hair and eyes. He knew pride as he stared at her, for she was his granddaughter. Like the Dolores del Rio, he thought, remembering the only motion picture he had ever seen.

He sat at the table with Román, who stared into nothingness. There had been a great quarrel that morning between

the stranger and McManus and afterward McManus had been most upset. So Román drank now and then from his fruit jar and brooded.

The boys, Pepe, Doroteo and Alfredo, were outside, playing at throwing rocks at one another. An occasional stone struck the house and once one came through the glassless window. Juanito crawled over and put the stone in his mouth. Dulces kept tugging at the *viejo's* trousers, wanting wine, but Teresina's baleful glance kept darting to the old one and he did not dare please Dulces.

He saw that Román's jar was empty so he filled it anew. Román lifted it and all but drained it. He belched and juice of the grape trickled out of the corners of his mouth. His eyes turned strangely luminescent. The *viejo* watched him carefully.

"To battle!" Román's voice was a roar that caused Dulces to squeal and Juanito to choke on the stone in his mouth. While Teresina upended Juanito and pounded his back, Román lurched to his feet. "To the wars!" he shouted, brandishing a fist. "I fear no one, neither the armies of this world nor those of the outer planets. Is there no one to battle me?" His chair crashed over as he stumbled away from the table. "*Cobardes,* cowards. Who will give me battle?" Abruptly he collapsed and lay sprawled on the floor, snoring.

The *viejo* sighed. "Poor Román. He never could take much wine."

At that moment there came the loud blast of a car horn from beyond the creek. "It is he, it is he," Amparo cried excitedly, and gave her dress one last smoothing.

"Amparo," the *viejo* said sternly as the girl started for the door, "remember your manners. You must invite the Señor Butler within. Politeness and courtesy demand it."

Amparo was soon back, holding on to the arm of the stranger. "Enter, enter," the *viejo* cried, rising to his feet. "Señor Butler, my home is yours. Teresina. A glass for the Señor Butler. Quick. Quick. A glass."

They possessed only the one good glass and had saved it for the stranger. Teresina placed it carefully on the table and the *viejo* poured it full. Under Amparo's urging, the stranger wended his way between Juanito and Dulces. On the floor, Román snored a steady rhythm.

"Sit," the *viejo* said, "drink. I would have you as my guest a while." He cocked an ear, listening to the shouts of the boys outside. He could hear Alfredo and Doroteo, but not Pepe. The *viejo* nodded to himself. Good, he thought, it starts well. "Drink," he urged the stranger, who seemed somewhat ill at ease. And when the glass had been drained, "Amparo, fill his glass again."

The stranger glanced at Amparo, who smiled and nestled up to him. "Let's go, baby," he said. "I got no time for creeps."

"Señor Butler, pardon," the *viejo* said. "Why such a hurry? I wish to make talk with you."

The stranger looked at his watch. "The drive-in is open. The picture's gonna start any minute now. You don't want to miss any of it, do you, honey?"

The *viejo* looked stern. "Señor Butler. Pardon. I wish to know something about you. Amparo is my granddaughter. I feel a great responsibility for her. Although she has sixteen years, she is innocent and it is my wish that she remain so. Therefore, I demand to know something of you before I allow her to leave in your company."

The stranger spoke, telling of his life. The *viejo* nodded approvingly throughout the recitation, filling the wine glass and his fruit jar each time they emptied. When the stranger was through, the *viejo* insisted on narrating his military experiences as a revolutionary under Pancho Villa in old Mexico. When the *viejo* finished, the wine gallon was all but empty. The *viejo* rose weaving to his feet.

"You satisfy me, Señor Butler. I entrust my Amparo in your care. I know you will treat her like a true gentleman."

Afterward the *viejo* explained to McManus. "Such a tra-

gedy. My face is made white by it. When the Señor Butler went to turn his car, the brakes would not hold and the car plunged into the creek, drowning the Señor Butler, who could not get out. Fortunately, my Amparo was not within the car. She had remained without to guide the Señor Butler while he turned it." The *viejo* shook his head and clucked his tongue. "It is true, what they say, that he who drinks should not take upon himself the driving of a car."

McManus stared hard at the *viejo*. "Is what you have told me the truth?"

The *viejo* waved a hand. "Perhaps I have concealed a little. Pepe, he is skillful in the repairing and adjusting of the brakes, is he not? He will be a great mechanic some day, that one. While I entertained the Señor Butler, Pepe proceeded to drain the fluid of the brakes. Who is there to say that the fluid did not drain of itself?"

McManus stared long and hard at the *viejo*. Complete understanding came to McManus and his eyes misted. He tried, but he could not speak.

"Why mourn?" the *viejo* asked. "He died full of wine and in joyful spirits. What death could be happier?" He lay back on his blankets and coughed and groaned. "It is not good to die sad or alone. Teresina, summon my family that I may have them all about me as I leave this mortal life once and for all. . . .

THE SWEATER

Richard O. Lewis

THE SLIGHT, steady clicking of the knitting needles grew ever louder. The noise of them began crashing against the walls of the tiny room and bouncing back again in nerve-wracking echoes.

"Strange," thought Halsey, eyeing their silvery speed, "how complete silence elsewhere can magnify a little sound like that into proportions that can fairly drive you nuts!"

His eyes traveled slowly upwards from his wife's busy fingers to her pointed face, her mousy hair, and onto the wall of the little room just above and beyond her head. The calendar hanging there showed the month of May, and the dates from the third through the sixteenth had been crossed out by heavy strokes from a black crayon.

From behind his magazine, Halsey looked at the needles again. "The last night!" he promised himself for the sixth time in as many minutes. "After nine o'clock in the morning, they'll be silent for good."

His exultation was cut short by a sudden stab of anxiety: *Had he kept accurate count of the days? Had he by any chance crossed out a date and, later in the day, another one?*

No. That couldn't have happened. He had taken ample precaution, had made a ritual of crossing off the days. At six o'clock each night—and only at six o'clock—he had walked to the wall, picked up the crayon, and marked an X across the date. That way, there was no chance of a mistake.

But no sooner had the first wave of uneasiness subsided than a new one swept in, to cause tiny dribbles of cold sweat to trickle down over his ribs from his armpits. Maybe *she* had crossed off an extra day! She could have done it; several times, through sheer boredom, he had taken after-

noon naps! But, no; there would be no reason for her to do so—nothing for her to gain! Yet . . .

"That would be an ironic twist," he mused, making light of the thought. "That way she would have me with her forever!"

He closed his eyes tightly against both her and her clanking needles. The old bat! Knitting him a sweater! A sweater he wouldn't be caught dead in! Her, with a hundred grand in her own right, knitting sweaters! Cooking those hideous boiled dinners! Keeping him grinding his heart out as a clerk in her cousin's stupid brokerage office! And never a night out to have any fun!

Well, beginning at nine o'clock in the morning, it would all be different. He'd kick that silly sweater to pieces, eat T-bones, quit that insipid job, and visit a few night spots—with Gertie, of course.

The very thought of red-haired, full-lipped, full-bosomed Gertie of the brokerage office spun him away as usual into a pleasing reverie. Now, if he had been cooped up here for fourteen days—nights—with Gertie . . . Well, he wouldn't have taken any afternoon naps through sheer boredom.

A trace of a smile began to play about his thin lips as the reverie led him even deeper into the delights of fantasy.

Halsey had shown all his neighbors his bomb shelter as soon as it had been completed.

"These," he had told them, indicating the steel tanks along one wall of the concrete structure, "are my oxygen bottles. Enough here to last three weeks." He had placed the necessary amount of stress on the last statement.

"And this is the larder." He had opened the large twin doors to expose a series of shelves piled high with tinned bread, meats, vegetables, fruits, and bottles of vitamins. One by one, he had exhibited such other items as the garbage disposal, the toilet, the air vent, the water supply, and similar necessities.

"There is no radio or television," he had explained. "In a real raid, there probably wouldn't be any broadcasts to listen

to after the first few minutes anyway, and probably no electricity to bring them in, and we want this test to simulate the real thing as much as possible. A psychological test, you know."

There was a shelf of books, a rack of magazines, and a number of puzzles and games. "And these," Halsey had said, indicating a small stack of cardboard cartons, "are models of ships, airplanes, and the like to be assembled. Something to keep the hands busy. My wife, of course, will bring along her needlework and her knitting. . . ."

He had always saved showing the lock on the steel door until last. Since it was to play the most important part in his plan, he felt that it should be left uppermost in the minds of his visiting neighbors.

"Anyone can live in a bomb shelter or a fallout shelter quite nicely for two weeks," he had stressed, "provided he can get out for a walk whenever he wants, talk over the telephone to his friends, or have the neighbors in for an occasional evening of bridge. But that is not a real test. *A real test can be made only when the occupants of the shelter cut themselves off entirely from contact with the outside world!*"

He had always paused here for a moment to let the impact of the thought etch itself deeply into the brain of the listener.

"This is a time lock activated by solar batteries which also are the source of power for the lights and the air fan. It is set for a period of two weeks to the exact minute. Once the door closes, the timer sets automatically, and the door cannot be opened from either the inside or the outside until the precise course of time is run. Only in this way can a true test be made as to whether two people can remain compatible during a real raid."

And the neighbors had gone away duly impressed. If the Halseys survived the ordeal, then—if worse came to worst—they too could weather the storm harmoniously within their own shelters. It was, indeed, a worthwhile experiment!

Halsey smiled now at the memory. Tomorrow morning at precisely nine o'clock, the neighbors would be waiting for the steel door to open, waiting to see, first-hand, the outcome of the great psychological experiment. *And they would all be witnesses to his wife's accidental death!*

The clashing knitting needles ceased their clangor. Mrs. Halsey laid the sweater on the little table beside her chair, yawned, got up, went to a small mirror and began creaming her face for the night.

She didn't speak, and neither did he. They hadn't said much to each other for the past few days. Yet, the two weeks had been fairly satisfactory ones—she content in her complete dominance and possession of him; he content in the knowledge that the dominance and possession would soon come to a definite end.

He mumbled a good-night as she got into her bed, but her answer was scarcely audible.

Halsey thumbed through some magazines for nearly an hour, then got into his pajamas, climbed into his bed, and flicked the light switch at the head board.

The small room was plunged instantly into silent darkness, and in a minute or two the luminous dial of his wristwatch became plainly visible. It was a few minutes to midnight.

Halsey slept fitfully. He was tangled in the sweater. The door wouldn't open. The world was sprouting mushroom clouds. Something had gone wrong with the time clock. . . .

He found himself staring at the glowing dial of the wristwatch. It was exactly seven o'clock. He smiled into the darkness. He had practiced for a full week to awaken precisely at seven.

He lay for a while without moving, giving the sticky webs of sleepiness time to clear. This was the zero hour. He could call off the whole idea, walk out of the door at nine o'clock, greet his neighbors—and go on living with her for the rest of his natural life. . . .

He stifled the groan the thought provoked. No, the plan

had to be carried through! Otherwise, life to him would be intolerable!

Silently, he laid back the covers, swung his feet over the edge of the bed, sat up, and slid his feet into his slippers. Her bed was but a step away in the darkness. He sat for a moment, orienting himself and getting a measure of control over an inner trembling, then took the pillow from his bed in his two hands, rose, and took the step.

The pillow went down quickly over where he knew her head would be, and the bed clothes, held down tightly on either side of her slight form by his straddling knees, acted as a straitjacket against her struggles.

It seemed like hours, but it couldn't have been more than three or four minutes. There was a final spasmodic twitch of muscles, then a general relaxation.

Halsey put the pillow back on his bed and dented it sufficiently with his fist to indicate it had been slept on, then turned on the small night-light and glanced at his watch. Seven-fifteen.

He didn't look at his wife's prone figure on the bed as he went around to the oxygen tanks. A moment later, the gas was hissing noisily from the open valves, and a moment after that Halsey was reeling drunkenly around the room.

"An oxygen jag," he said aloud and stumbled hurriedly back toward the valves. His fingers fumbled them shut. He wheeled about, stumbled over the little table, knocked it and the sweater and the needles to the floor, and finally reached the air-vent control.

When the little fan was humming with increased industry, he went back to the gas vents, opened them wide, and sat down and breathed shallowly.

He found that he was trembling all over. He looked at his watch a dozen times, looked to see if it were actually running, then silently reprimanded himself for his impatience. He had estimated it would take a couple of hours or more for the large tanks to dissipate their contents; he had now but to wait.

When the hissing finally stopped, the silence came as a distinct shock, and the only sound in the room now was the body-shaking hammering of his own heart.

The gauge on the last tank, the one in use, showed a quarter full. He looked at his watch again. Eighteen minutes till nine.

He opened the valve wider and watched the gauge and his watch carefully, his body still trembling. A miscalculation now could well prove fatal. He manipulated the valve for several minutes, and the last of the gas finally hissed from the tank at exactly five minutes till nine. There was now only the oxygen within the shelter itself.

Halsey hurried to the vent fan and turned it back to normal. Then he tore open the collar of his pajamas and lay down on the floor near the door. Everything was going precisely to plan. In slightly less than five minutes, the time lock would click, the door would spring slightly ajar, and the neighbors would rush in—to discover Halsey on the floor, half unconscious and gasping for air, his wife smothered in bed. All due to some failure of the oxygen tanks.

Once again, time dragged in an endless manner. What if the time lock failed to open? What if . . .

No! No! He mustn't permit himself to think of things like that! The time lock would open! He had tested it time and time again! In fact, his wife had insisted on a series of tests before she had consented to the experiment.

But what if he had released the oxygen too soon? What if the timing mechanism had slowed down? The neighbors would mill around outside, waiting. How long would they wait before deciding that something must have gone wrong? How long would it take them to force the steel door? Or would they, believing he had an extra supply of oxygen, wait a day or two before doing anything?

His nervous trembling increased. The air began to feel heavy and oppressive. His pajamas were damp all over his body, from perspiration.

His eyes never left the dial of the watch now. Three min-

utes. Two minutes. And, finally, one minute till nine; just 60 seconds.

He began to take deep, tremulous breaths in an attempt to bring his quivering nerves under control, then stopped almost instantly as he realized that the deep breathing would deplete the oxygen rapidly. The thundering of his heart grew louder, and waves of pressure began to beat at his eardrums.

Forty seconds. . . .

He was certain that his watch had stopped, that he was slowly and helplessly smothering. Panic laid hold of him, and he suddenly realized the awful terror that must have tortured his wife during her last few seconds of consciousness. He tried to shake the thought from his brain—not because of any sorrow for her, but to rid himself of the fear of having to experience the same horrible ordeal.

Twenty seconds. . . .

Ten seconds. . . .

He wanted to cry out, to leap to his feet, screaming. But his throat muscles were constricted, his body unresponsive to his fear-ridden brain.

Zero seconds. . . .

He lay upon the floor in his own sweat, sobbing silently and convulsively.

Then it came! The great sledgehammer blow of steel against steel. He thought at first it was the neighbors trying to break down the door. Then he realized in sudden elation that it was merely the metallic click of the time lock shattering the silence. The steel door was ajar! It had swayed inward a scant half inch!

The neighbors should rush in now. It was part of the plan. They should rush in just in the nick of time to witness the frightful scene.

But there was no babble of voices beyond the door, not a scrape of a foot on the stone steps, not a sound.

Halsey grasped the edge of the door with his fingertips

and pulled. The heavy door was adamant. His fingernails splintered and broke. Gasping, he clutched the edge with the fingers of both hands. It gave an inch. Sunlight and fresh air rushed through the opening. Even as his lungs gasped in the air eagerly, his eyes quickly told him that the stairwell was empty.

Bewildered, he struggled to his feet, flung the door open, and staggered up the short flight of steps, his eyes squinting against the raw sunlight.

The voice of the siren reached him then. It began with a low moan, rose rapidly higher in pitch to split the skies, and reached out across the land with undulations of warning. He turned in its direction and saw the pall of smoke that cloaked Midville, a scant mile away across the lake. And even as he watched, a great column of flame spread upward from just beyond the town, its livid crest spreading rapidly outward.

Halsey's brain warned him of the shock blast that came from atomic mushrooms to level everything in its path above the ground, and through no volition of his own he went spinning back down the stairs and into the comparative darkness of the shelter.

Something in the shadows clutched his feet to engulf them in a strong tangle of mesh. Something bit deeply into his ankle. As he bent to free himself, the knitted mesh tightened as if pulled by unseen hands, and Halsey stumbled backwards against the steel door.

The time lock clanged deafeningly in the small room—and echoed and echoed and echoed.

Outside, the siren continued to wail in desperation as the people of Midville watched the flames leap ever closer to the second large storage tank of gasoline. It was the largest fire the townspeople had witnessed for more than thirty years.

IQ—184

Fletcher Flora

Rena Holly was in the living room with the policeman when Charles Holly went downstairs to join them. Rena was sitting in a high-backed chair of polished walnut upholstered in dark red velvet. She was sitting there quietly, very erect, her knees together and her feet flat upon the floor and her hands folded in her lap. Her face was pale and still, perfectly composed, and she was even now, even in the violation of her grief by police procedure, so incredibly lovely that Charles felt in his heart the familiar sweet anguish that was his normal response to her. Only her eyes moved ever so slightly in his direction when he entered the room.

"Charles," she said, "this is Lieutenant Casey of the police. He is inquiring about Richard's death."

Lieutenant Casey arose from the chair in which he had been sitting opposite Rena. He was a stocky man with broad shoulders and a deep chest and thin gray hair brushed neatly across his skull from a low side part. His face was deeply lined and weathered-looking, as if he spent much time in the wind and sun, and the hand he extended toward Charles had pads of callus on fingers and palm, although its touch was surprisingly gentle. He seemed awkward in his gray suit, which was actually of good cut and quality, and the impression he gave generally was one of regret, almost of apology, that he had been forced by his position to intrude.

"Good afternoon, Lieutenant," Charles said. "We've been expecting you."

"Sorry," Casey said. "It's a routine matter, of course. I regret that I'm compelled to disturb you at this time."

"Not at all. We must tell you whatever is necessary."

Charles sat down and placed his hands on his knees in an attitude of attention, while Casey resumed his place in the chair from which he had risen. "Please ask me anything you wish."

"I think that Lieutenant Casey wishes you to tell him exactly how Richard died," Rena said.

She spoke softly, with a kind of deficiency of inflection. Charles was aware of the terrible and almost terrifying quality of her composure, and he wondered if Casey was also aware of this. He doubted it. Her horror and grief were not apparent, although the latter could be assumed, and Casey was not familiar, as Charles was, with the wonderful complexity of her character.

"I'd be grateful if you would," Casey said. "Just as it happened from the beginning, if you don't mind."

"Well." Charles paused, seeming to gather his thoughts, but he knew, in fact, what he was going to say, and his mind was functioning, as it always did, with precision and clarity. "Richard was a guest in this house for the weekend. Perhaps Rena has told you that. In any event, he asked me this morning to take a walk with him. I did not wish to walk with him, and I told him so, but he asked me to humor him as a special favor. I did not really feel that I owed him a favor, special or otherwise, but he was so urgent that I agreed to go."

"What was the reason for his urgency?"

"The answer to that would involve Rena. I'd rather that she answered, if she wants the question answered at all."

"Oh?" Casey looked vaguely astonished and somewhat distressed that he had been led so quickly by his own question into an area of intimacy that he would have preferred to avoid. "Mrs. Holly?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant. As Charles has said, we must tell you whatever is necessary." Rena's hands moved, smoothing the skirt over her knees, and then sought and held each other again in her lap. "Richard was in love with me. And I with him. It was not an emotional attachment that either

of us particularly wanted in the beginning, but it happened, and there was no help for it. We wanted to marry. I spoke with Charles about it and was, I thought, candid and reasonable. But it was an unfortunate effort on my part, I'm afraid. Charles was very angry. He refused even to discuss the matter. Then, of course, Richard wanted to approach him. I agreed rather reluctantly, and it was for that purpose specifically that I invited Richard here for the weekend. And that was why Richard urged Charles to take the walk with him."

She stopped abruptly, resuming the perfect posture and expression of composure that speaking had barely disturbed, and Casey, after waiting a few seconds until it was clear that she was finished, turned back to Charles.

"That is true," Charles said. "I suppose he felt that a brisk walk in the open air would be propitious to his purpose. The manly approach. Two gentlemen settling amicably between themselves a rather delicate matter. Richard was remarkably naïve." His voice took on the faintest color of irony, as if he were mildly amused in retrospect by something which had been irritating at the time. "I must confess, however, that I was not impressed. Richard's effort to win me over was no more successful than Rena's, although I listened courteously and gave him every chance. All this time, while he was talking, we were walking among the trees in the direction of the river, and we came out upon a high bluff just where the river bends. There is a wooden bench on the bluff there, for it's a rather scenic spot, and we sat on the bench until he had quite finished what he wanted to say. Then I told him that my feelings were unchanged, and that I should never be reconciled to any kind of intimate relationship between him and Rena. It made me sick to think about it."

He paused again, ordering details precisely and accurately in his mind, and Casey waited in silence for him to continue. Rena did not seem to have heard him at all, or even

to be aware at the moment that he or Casey was in the room. She had been staring at her folded hands, but now she raised her eyes to a focus beyond the walls and perhaps beyond the time. If she had listened to anything, or was now waiting for anything, it was a private sound and a private expectation.

Now, Charles was thinking, *I have come upon dangerous ground. Up to this point I have adhered strictly to the truth, because the truth served, but now it is time for the essential deviation, the necessary lie.*

"Please go on," Casey prompted.

"Richard was very angry with me," Charles said. "As for me, I wanted only to leave him, to terminate an unpleasant episode as quickly as possible, and I stood up and walked away to the edge of the bluff. Richard followed me, still very angry, and began to shake me by the arm. I do not like to be touched, even without violence, and I tried to jerk away, but he held on to my arm firmly. I struggled, finally breaking free, and the action caused him to lose his balance. We were standing right at the edge of the bluff, much nearer than either of us, I think, quite realized in our emotional state, and, to put it simply and briefly, he fell over the edge. The bluff, as you know, is high and almost perpendicular at that place. At the foot, the bank of the river at the bend is wide and littered with great rocks. Richard fell among the rocks, where you found him, and was, I believe, killed instantly. He was certainly dead when I reached him, after finding a way down the bluff farther along. When I saw that he was falling, I tried to catch hold of him, but he was gone too quickly."

And there it is done, and done well, he thought. *The essential deviation. The necessary lie. So slight a deviation and so small a lie. The difference between holding and pushing. Between life and death. Between innocence and guilt. Casey believes me, certainly, but Rena doesn't. Rena, lovely Rena, sits and says nothing and knows everything. She knows how*

Richard died, and why, but that is unimportant. What is important is that she submits to a deeper commitment than any she could have felt to Richard or feels now to justice. She is mine so long as she lives. She will never belong to anyone else.

"I see." Casey slapped his knees suddenly with both hands, the sound startling in the still room. It even startled Casey, who had made it, and he clenched one of the hands and stared reproachfully at the big knuckles under taut and whitened skin. "You were wise to leave the body where it fell until we had seen it. You have been very helpful altogether, I must say. Thank you very much."

"There is so little that one can do, really." Charles stood up. "Now if I may be excused, I'd like to return to my room."

"Of course. You've had a bad experience, I know. I appreciate your cooperation in such trying circumstances."

Having been excused by Casey, Charles turned toward Rena. She seemed unaware of this, still abstracted, but after a few seconds she turned her head and stared at him with her dark expressive eyes which were now so carefully empty of all expression. She nodded without speaking, the merest motion of her head, and he turned and went out of the room into the hall. He stopped there, out of sight but not of sound, his head half-turned and tilted, as he stood and listened.

"There's a clever young fellow," Casey said in the room behind him.

"Yes," Rena said.

"I must say, however, that I'd find him a bit disturbing after a while. He'd make me feel inferior. Besides, I confess that I'm always a bit shocked to hear a child call his mother by her Christian name. I suppose I'm hopelessly old-fashioned."

"Charles is not really a child, Lieutenant, although he's only twelve. He's exceptional. His intelligence quotient, I am told, is one hundred eighty-four."

It would have been natural if her voice had assumed a lilt of pride, but it did not. It still retained its odd deficiency of inflection. To Charles, who began moving silently away, it was a voice that had no choice of expression between a monotone and a scream.

KILL, IF YOU WANT ME!

Richard Deming

—1—

ON THE HUNDRED-MILE DRIVE back from Morganville, I kept priming myself to tell off Mathews the minute I walked into the office. I was using martinis for priming fluid, one about every ten miles.

Since I was going to be fired anyway, I didn't have anything to lose. Maybe it's childish to tell off the boss when you're fired, but I had reasons.

I don't think I tend to blame others for my own mistakes. When I was bounced off the Raine City police force as a rookie for drinking on duty, I never held it against the lieutenant who caught me. Six months later, when I lost my agency job for trying to shake down a client, I didn't blame anybody but myself. And I didn't hold any resentment against the inspector who caught me gimmicking my cab meter when I was hacking.

But now I was a reformed character. Since shooting angles had never gotten me anything but trouble, I'd been square with the Schyler Tool Company during the six months I'd been with it. I didn't even pad my expense account. And I'd worked my head off.

Only I couldn't seem to sell tools. Not enough of them anyway. I knew the axe was going to fall this time the minute I turned in my scanty order book.

I wouldn't have resented losing the job so much if my opinion of George Mathews had been higher. But to be fired by an incompetent was rubbing it in.

Rating the president of Schyler Tools as an incompetent wasn't just sour grapes. It was an opinion held throughout

the plant. George Mathews held his position because his wife owned controlling interest. Without her vote, he couldn't have been a stock boy. He spent about three hours a day at the office, the rest golfing, boating and discreetly chasing females. Discreetly, because his wife's tolerance of his shortcomings ended with extramarital activity.

The real brains of the company was the force of assistants old Lyman Schyler, Helen Mathews' father, had built up before he died. It went on functioning automatically under its figurehead boss just as efficiently as it had under Schyler.

I was pretty well primed by the time I reached Raine City. Not drunk, just courageous as a lion.

The little blonde who served as George Mathews' receptionist gave me a nice smile and trilled, "Good afternoon, Mr. Cavanaugh."

The smile turned to a look of alarm when, without even answering, I pushed through the swinging gate and headed for Mathews' private office.

"You can't go in there!" she squealed. "Mr. Mathews is in conference."

By then I had my hand on the knob. The sound of scurrying feet as I pushed open the door made me glance back. The secretary was rushing after me with an expression of horror on her face.

I winked at her, stepped inside and shut the door.

My unannounced entrance brought on a flurry of activity. With a flash of white legs a shapely brunette bounced from Mathews' leather couch, swept up her dress and darted into his private washroom so rapidly I didn't even glimpse her face.

But I didn't have to. I recognized the small pink birthmark just above the swell of rounded hips. George Mathews wasn't the only man at Schyler Tools who knew file clerk Gertie Drake. However, he probably did have the distinction of being the first to get acquainted on company time.

Mathews' look of consternation changed to a threatening frown when he saw who had interrupted his conference.

But he delayed saying anything until he got himself readjusted.

Then he asked in a cold voice, "What do you mean bursting in here without being announced?"

I had intended blistering his ears with my personal opinion of him, but the situation changed my mind. Giving him a chummy smile, I took one of his padded guest chairs and lit a cigarette. Mathews glared at me.

"I don't seem to be much good on the road," I said. "I think I'd like district sales manager better."

Striding around the desk, he looked down at me with clenched fists. I wasn't very impressed. At thirty-two George Mathews was lean and hard and well-muscled, but at twenty-eight I was leaner and harder and better-muscled. Beside outweighing his one seventy-five by twenty pounds.

"Of all the unmitigated—"

"Would you rather have me discuss the promotion with Mrs. Mathews?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again. After staring at me wordlessly for a few moments, he managed in a slightly high voice, "Are you trying to blackmail me?"

I gave him a pleasant nod.

He stared a while more, unclenched his fists and rubbed the back of his neck. His gaze strayed to the closed washroom door.

"I'll make as good a district sales manager as you do a company president," I said reasonably.

Looking back at me, he sniffed. "You've been drinking," he said.

"A little," I admitted. "We all have our minor indulgences."

"You're drunk."

"You're an adulterer," I countered amiably.

His fists clenched again, then unclenched. Instead of getting mad, he decided to make me a fellow conspirator.

Summoning a rueful smile, he said, "What the hell, Tom. We don't have to insult each other. You'd get a little sore

if I barged in on you at a time like this. And don't tell me you've never had a time like this."

"I won't. But I'm single."

He dismissed this with an airy wave. "According to Kinsey, fifty percent of all married men cheat a little."

"How many of them have wives who could pitch them out in the street without a nickle?"

He flushed. "You want to be nasty about this?"

"No," I said. "I just want to be district sales manager."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said testily. "There's no opening."

"Ed Harmony retires in two weeks."

"You know very well Harry Graves is scheduled for that spot. Moving you over his head would create an office scandal."

I knew I was in by the way he was arguing instead of just telling me to go to hell.

"Then create one," I said. "I don't feel like going on the road any more, so I'll take a two-week leave until the job opens. With pay, of course."

For a long time he examined me coldly, the false camaraderie gone from his eyes. Then he said in a curt tone, "All right, Cavanaugh. Now get the hell out of my office."

—2—

If there was any scandal over my appointment as district sales manager, most of it had died down by the time I returned from my two-weeks' leave. In the interest of harmony, Harry Graves, who had expected the promotion, had been moved to another district so that he wouldn't have to serve under me. And while congratulations on my appointment from my sales force struck me as rather perfunctory, there was no indication of resentment.

Possibly one of the reasons I was accepted with so little furor was that during my absence the plant found a more interesting tidbit to gossip about. The affair between file

clerk Gertie Drake and the company president had become an open scandal.

Because I was too new in an executive position to be on gossiping terms with my staff, I didn't learn this at once. As a matter of fact, I guessed it from observation before anyone got around to mentioning it to me.

Beyond reporting in to George Mathews my first day on the new job, a short and frigid meeting, I made a point of avoiding him, not caring to push my luck. Except for an occasional glimpse of Gertie Drake in the main office, I didn't see her either the first few days I was back, which set me to wondering if she were avoiding me. We'd had some pretty smoky sessions at my apartment on occasion, and, while both of us regarded them as casual interludes, I thought she might at least pop her head in long enough to admire my new office. Suspecting she might be embarrassed by my catching her dallying with the boss, I took the trouble to look her up.

I arranged to get her alone by the simple device of asking my stenographer for the file on a dead account. The storage files were part of Gertie's province, and I knew the request would be relayed to her by phone. After waiting ten minutes, I went to the file room.

This was a perfect place for privacy, because no one aside from Gertie had any reason to enter it. Even she used it rarely, as it contained nothing but tier upon tier of stored records seven years or more old.

I found her in a rear alcove formed by twin rows of file cabinets. Startled by my unexpected appearance, she looked up from the drawer she was searching.

She made a face at me. "You're developing a bad habit of sneaking up on people, Tom."

The complete lack of self-consciousness in her tone, coupled with the oblique reference to the last time I had startled her, convinced me it wasn't embarrassment which had kept her away.

"Sinners ought to lock their doors," I said. "How have you been, Gertie?"

"All right." She turned her attention back to the drawer.

For a few moments I admired her in profile. She had a nice one all the way down from her pert little nose to her tiny feet.

Finally I asked, "How'd you like to get together some night soon?"

She shook her head without looking at me. "Sorry, Tom. I'm pretty busy these nights."

The answer surprised me. Gertie had always been a healthy animal with the moral outlook of an alley cat. About the only men in the office she hadn't favored were the ones who hadn't suggested it.

I said, "You must not have understood the question, honey." Lightly, I gripped her arm and pulled her against me. Momentarily her round breast pressed into my chest, but before I could encircle her with my arms, she twisted away. The almost prim look on her face astonished me.

"I'm not like that any more," she said. "I only play with one man, Tom."

"Oh? Who's the lucky fellow?"

"None of your business." She closed the drawer she'd been searching and began to search another.

"You're serious about this guy?"

She barely nodded.

"Serious like marriage?"

She glanced at me, then away again. "Eventually, maybe. Not right away. It hasn't gotten to that point yet."

"Oh?" I couldn't think of anything more to say, so I finally murmured lamely, "Well, I wish you luck, Gertie," and retreated.

It wasn't until later that same day when I happened to spot her coming from George Mathews' office with a radiantly happy smile on her face that the incredulous thought hit me that Mathews was the man. If she expected eventual mar-

riage from him, she was in for a jolt, I thought. George Mathews would never divorce his meal ticket, no matter how much he was in love.

The next day I learned that my guess was right. My stenographer apparently decided I was going to last as her boss and tested our future relationship by cautiously dishing me up some office gossip. Included in it was a passing reference to the affair between Gertie Drake and Mathews. When I accepted this without comment, but with an encouraging smile, she needed no more urging to unload the whole story.

I gathered that half the plant was buzzing over the love affair because the principals made so little effort to keep it secret. Gertie Drake moved in and out of Mathews' office at will, often remaining in it as long as an hour, while the president's secretary-receptionist barred entry to all visitors with the excuse that Mathews was "in conference." What the little blonde's opinion of this sentry duty was remained a secret, she apparently being the only nongossiper in the office.

Gertie made no bones about being the boss's mistress, my stenographer told me, seeming to take considerable pride in the position. She didn't exactly brag about it, the girl said, but her attitude left no doubt in the other female workers' minds that she considered Mathews her private property.

"As though any of the rest of us would be interested in a married man," my informant inserted virtuously. "She even refers to him as George, though she makes a point of calling him Mr. Mathews to his face when any of us girls are around."

I learned that Mathews himself seemed unaware of the gossip. Outside his private office, he was as politely formal to Gertie as he was to the other help. But inside . . .

As that part was obviously mere guessing by the grapevine, I stopped listening at that point and became engrossed in my own thoughts.

The whole thing left me vaguely uneasy. It was common

knowledge to everyone but his wife that George Mathews did a bit of philandering now and then. But he'd never been this open. If word of the affair got to Helen Mathews, my hold over Mathews was gone, and I was reasonably certain he'd fire me at once. If he himself lasted long enough after the exposé to fire anyone.

I decided after some thought that, with the gossip as extensive as it was, Helen Mathews was certain to get wind of it eventually. The minute that happened, my job was in danger, but it would be considerably less in danger if I had some support from Mrs. Mathews.

I would have preferred the status quo, with the company's majority stockholder never learning of her husband's infidelity. But if it was inevitable that she find out, I thought it best that she find out from me.

If I approached it just right, I believed I could insure my job against any eventuality.

I decided to visit Helen Mathews the first evening I was sure her husband wasn't home.

—3—

My opportunity came the next night. The morning paper announced that there was to be a community-chest banquet that evening, and that George Mathews was to be the main speaker. The banquet was scheduled for eight o'clock, so I timed my arrival at the Mathews home for eight-thirty.

The Mathews lived in a large rose-granite home on Sheridan Drive, one of the most exclusive sections in town. With Mrs. Mathews' money I imagine they had servants, but apparently they were gone for the evening, because Helen Mathews answered the door herself.

I had seen Helen Mathews only once, on one of her rare visits to the plant; we hadn't been introduced at the time. But I had been sufficiently impressed by my single glimpse to wonder why George Mathews chased other women when he had something so nice at home. It had occurred to me that

possibly he strayed because his wife was frigid, for, though she was a beautiful woman, her beauty was of a cool, regal sort, not the warm, animal beauty of Gertie Drake.

She was a slim, poised woman of about my age, with a delicately sculptured face framed by loose golden hair. She looked at me inquiringly.

"I'm Tom Cavanaugh, Mrs. Mathews," I said. "One of Schyler Tool's district sales managers. May I speak to you for a minute?"

"Of course," she said, moving aside to let me enter.

She led me into a large front room expensively equipped with Louis XIV furniture, indicated a handsome chair with clawed feet and seated herself on a sofa with similar feet. When we were both seated, she gave me a second inquiring look.

I said, "This is a rather delicate matter, Mrs. Mathews. I'm risking my job by coming here."

Her fine eyebrows rose, but she made no comment.

"As it happens, I would have been risking my job by not coming, too. I've been sort of between the devil and the deep sea."

She merely waited expectantly.

"It concerns your husband, Mrs. Mathews."

A wary expression flitted across her face, was gone, and her features became expressionless. "Before you go on, Mr. Cavanaugh, maybe you should know that I love my husband very much."

"I'm aware of it. Which is why I hesitated so long to do anything which might hurt your relationship. But it's reached the point where it's inevitable that you're going to hear what I have to say from some source. I'd rather you hear it from me."

"Why?"

"Because your husband thinks I'm the only one who knows it. The minute he discovers you've learned of it, he's going to assume I told you. And he'll fire me on the spot."

She said coolly, "Won't his assumption be right?"

"Not if I waited a few more days. The matter's become common gossip. Practically every person in the plant knows it. You couldn't possibly escape hearing of it from some source."

"I see. And you hope by telling me first to enlist my aid in keeping your job."

"Is that wrong?" I asked. "Consider my position, Mrs. Mathews. I happen to have some knowledge I didn't want to have and which I never intended to use against your husband. It's not my fault the knowledge has become widespread. Of course, I hope to enlist your aid. It's my only chance out of an impossible situation. If I waited for someone else to tell you, I'd be certain to lose my job. Without your support, I'll lose it anyway, but that's the calculated risk I had to take."

For a time she studied me without expression. Presently she said, "Having gone this far, you may as well tell me the rest of the story, Mr. Cavanaugh."

I took a deep breath. "Your husband has a mistress."

What she expected—news that Mathews was dipping into the company till, perhaps—I don't know. But it obviously wasn't this. Her face didn't change an iota, but the suddenly pinched look about her eyes indicated shock more definitely than if she had screamed.

"Who?" she asked with unnatural quietness.

"A file clerk named Gertie Drake. A girl about twenty-three years old."

"It isn't just office gossip? Perhaps because he's been overfriendly?"

I shook my head. "They practically flaunt it in front of the whole plant. She does, anyway. Apparently he's unaware of the gossip. Besides, I *know* it's an affair. The reason Mr. Mathews thinks I'm the only one who knows about it is that I accidentally walked in on them at a crucial moment."

Her face still contained no expression, but I noted it was appreciably paler. "You think it's just philandering, Mr.

Cavanaugh? Or is he serious about this girl?"

I shrugged. "She's serious. She's been heard to say that she hopes for eventual marriage. How he feels, I can't say."

"She expects to marry him!"

Her voice was so sharp it startled me. I said, "I didn't say, 'expects.' I said, 'hopes.' There's a considerable difference."

She stared at me for a long time, then moved her gaze to the fireplace and stared at it for a longer time.

Eventually, without looking at me, she said, "I love George enough to forgive a physical infidelity, Mr. Cavanaugh. Providing he ended the affair. But I'd never stay with a man I thought loved another woman. I have to know."

Silence built between us until she turned to give me a level look. "Are you willing to do me a favor to win my support, Mr. Cavanaugh?"

"What kind of favor?"

"Find out for me exactly how much this woman means to my husband."

"How?" I asked. "I can't read his mind."

"There are other ways. Learn how much time they spend together. Where they go and what they do. How he treats her. A woman could tell by observation if another woman loved a man. Can't you diagnose a man's attitude toward a woman?"

"You mean follow them?"

She made an impatient gesture. "That's up to you. I don't care what method you use. But I have to know how he feels. It's important enough to me so that I'll guarantee your job if you find out what I want to know."

I rose from my chair. "All right, Mrs. Mathews. I'll try to find out."

She followed me to the front door. As I turned to say good-night, she laid a hand on my sleeve and looked into my face. "Tell me, Mr. Cavanaugh, was protecting your job the sole reason you came to me?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"How well do you know this Gertie Drake?"

I hesitated a moment, said reservedly, "We used to go out together some."

She smiled a little bitterly. "I suspected as much. It seemed you might just have suggested more discretion to my husband if you hadn't had a personal interest. That makes us a little closer allies, doesn't it?"

I didn't deny the charge that I had a personal interest in Gertie. If she was sharp enough to pick a hole in my story which I hadn't even considered, I was glad that her woman's intuition had so neatly patched the hole.

—4—

My six months' agency experience as a private investigator came in handy now because I knew all the procedures to follow, and I knew how to tail a man without being detected. I enlisted my stenographer's unwitting aid by letting her pour gossip in my ear so that I learned of contacts Mathews and Gertie Drake had in the plant which I otherwise would not have known about.

Outside the plant, I began to tail Mathews night and day. This wasn't as difficult as it sounds for as a junior executive I didn't have to punch a time clock and was free to come and go pretty much as I pleased. I developed the habit of parking my car on the street near the main gate instead of on the plant parking lot, where I had a reserved place. Fifty bucks to the downstairs receptionist in front of the main entrance bought me a phone call every time Mathews left the building. By the time he could get his car from the lot and drive through the main gate, I was seated in mine all ready to tail him.

For three days this netted me nothing. Mathews spent the first afternoon at the golf course, the second fishing from his sail boat with a male friend, and the third playing golf again. On the fourth day he left the plant at noon, met

Gertie Drake at a quiet back-street restaurant on the East Side at twelve-thirty and kept her there in a booth until two, when presumably she returned to the office.

Mathews himself spent the rest of the afternoon playing golf again.

Evenings I had a little more luck. The first night he attended a party with his wife, but the other three he went out alone. Each time, he drove straight to the rooming house where Gertie lived, picked her up and headed south out of town. Their trysting place turned out to be a roadhouse named the Flying Swan about ten miles from the city line on Route 60.

All three evenings followed the same pattern. They would have a few drinks, dance once, then disappear upstairs, where the management maintained rooms for the convenience of patrons who wanted privacy. After an hour or so they'd reappear, have a nightcap and go home.

On Saturday afternoon, after tailing Mathews to the Yacht Club and watching him sail off alone in his boat, I phoned Helen Mathews and suggested we meet somewhere so that I could deliver a report. She picked a small bar and grill named the Top Hat about a mile up Sheridan Drive from her home.

When we were seated in a back booth with drinks before us, I said, "Friday at lunch was the only time they've met outside the plant all week during the day. But he saw her Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at night. They go to a place called the Flying Swan out on Route Sixty. Have a few drinks, dance a little, then spend an hour to two hours upstairs."

She winced slightly. "Have you formed any opinion of how he feels about her?"

I said dryly, "Not emotionally, but she must have an overpowering physical attraction for him. They also had 'conference' in his private office on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday."

Red spots appeared in her cheeks, she drained her high-

ball at a gulp and asked for another. I ordered her a double and myself none as I hadn't even touched the first yet.

While we were waiting for the order to be filled, she said, "I think he plans to spend next weekend with her. He wants me to go up to our cottage on Weed Lake next Friday to get it ready for a few days' vacation. He doesn't plan to join me until Monday."

"Going?" I asked.

"Why not? I may as well speed up this thing by giving him all the rope he wants."

The waiter temporarily interrupted our conversation by bringing her second drink.

She drank half of it before saying, "If you can manage to keep them under close observation the whole weekend, I'll appreciate it. You can understand that I have to know soon or I'll go crazy."

"All right," I said. "I'll do my best."

We left it at that.

Monday nothing unusual happened. On Tuesday Mathews left the plant at two P.M. and plenty happened.

He first led me to a pawn shop on Franklin Avenue where he spent about fifteen minutes. Next he stopped at a sporting goods store downtown, and finally at a neighborhood hardware store. Only from the last did he emerge with a visible package.

It was about a foot square, and so heavy he had to heave it into the trunk of his car with both hands.

After following him back to the plant, I returned to the pawn shop. The proprietor was a wizened old man in his seventies.

"Police," I said, flashing a wallet identification card which denoted that I'd been a volunteer fireman four years previously, but which resembled the card detectives carried if you didn't examine it too closely. I put the wallet back in my pocket before he could get a good look.

"Yes, sir," the old man said.

"A man came in here about an hour ago. Around thirty-

two, black, curly hair, slim and well-dressed. Deeply tanned."

He nodded. "Yes, sir. A Mr. McClellan, I think. Just a minute."

Picking up a ledger, he peered at it nearsightedly. "McClelland, rather. John McClelland. What about him, officer?"

"What did he want?"

"He bought a secondhand thirty-two. Twenty-five dollars. He looked quite respectable. He isn't a criminal, is he, officer?"

"He isn't yet," I said slowly. "Maybe he's planning to be."

From the pawn shop I drove to the sporting goods store, and from there to the hardware store. At the former I learned that Mathews had purchased a box of .32 caliber shells, and from the latter he'd bought six sash weights and fifty feet of sash cord.

I didn't jump to any hasty conclusions. Returning to the plant, I used the same device I had once before to get Gertie Drake into the dead-file room. When I joined her there for a second time, she looked a little irked.

"Are you calling for these dead accounts just to see me alone?" she demanded.

Assuming an air of mock shame, I said, "You've found me out. Gertie, I want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About us. Why can't we get together again?"

"I told you why," she said impatiently. "I'm going steady."

I shook my head pityingly. "I know who you're going with, honey. Everyone in the plant knows. Why waste your time on a man who's never going to be able to take you anywhere but to back-street taverns?"

"That's all you know about it," she flared at me.

"He'll never marry you, Gertie, because he'll never get a divorce."

Balling her fists on her hips, she faced me with an angry look on her face. "Won't he, smarty-pants? Well, for your

information George loves me. He is going to get a divorce, and marry me."

That clinched it. I'd felt all along that George Mathews would never turn loose of his wife's money by getting a divorce, or letting her get one.

—5—

That evening I tailed Mathews from his home only far enough to make sure he would be gone for some hours. When he picked up Gertie Drake and headed south, I returned to his house.

Again I found Helen Mathews at home alone.

When we were seated in the front room, I asked, "Are any of your windows here out of repair? Won't slide up or down, for instance?"

She looked puzzled. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"Does your husband own a pistol?"

"Several. What are you getting at, Mr. Cavanaugh?"

"It'll hold a minute," I said. "Mrs. Mathews, today I needled Gertie Drake a little by telling her she was a sucker to play around with your husband, that he'd never take her anywhere but to back-street taverns. She got mad and told me they were in love, he intended to divorce you and marry her."

She paled slightly. "You think she was telling the truth?"

"She thought she was. But your husband isn't going to divorce you."

Her eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"Because, prior to my talk with Gertie, he bought a .32 caliber pistol, a box of shells, six window-sash weights and fifty feet of sash cord. He bought the pistol under an assumed name."

Her eyes widened even more.

"Since you say he already owns several pistols, I'd say he bought this one so it couldn't be traced back to him. And

if none of your windows need repair, I'd guess he intends to weight something and drop it in the lake. In short, it means he intends to kill you."

For nearly a minute she looked at me steadily without any expression at all on her face. Then she tumbled forward in a dead faint.

I couldn't get across the room fast enough to catch her before she hit the floor. But the carpet was too soft for her to hurt herself in falling. I laid her on the sofa and began to massage her wrists.

After a few moments her eyes slowly opened and she looked up at me dully.

"Maybe I should have broken it more gently," I said.

Withdrawing her hands from mine, she pressed the back of one to her forehead. In a wondering tone she said, "That's why he wants me alone up at the cottage. To kill me."

I didn't say anything to her.

She lay there, one hand still raised to her forehead, lost in her own thoughts. Rising, I went back to my chair. After a time she sat up, deathly pale but in control of herself.

"I think I want to be alone for a time," she said. "Will you please go?"

"Of course," I said instantly. "I'll let myself out. Don't get up."

As I started from the room, she said in a dead voice, "I'll phone you at work tomorrow, after I've had a chance to think."

Since I had learned what Helen Mathews wanted to know, there was no further point in tailing Mathews. For the first time in more than a week I put in a full day's work for the company. Mrs. Mathews phoned just before five P.M.

"I'd like to see you tonight," she said. "Somewhere we can be alone."

"How about my place?"

She said that would be fine, and I gave her the address.

"Expect me about eight-thirty," she said, and hung up.

My apartment has only three rooms, but the combination

living and dining-room is large and comfortable, with a brick fireplace, smart modern furniture and a thick pile rug twelve feet wide by eighteen long. After dinner, I gave it a brisk going over, checked my liquor supply, then showered and dressed as carefully as a high-school student getting ready for his first dance.

It wasn't until all these preparations were finished that it occurred to me I was behaving exactly as though I expected an evening of drinking and romance. Which seemed unlikely.

She arrived exactly at eight-thirty and I was surprised to discover she had dressed in line with my subconscious thoughts. I had never before seen her in anything but simple street dresses, but tonight she wore a daringly low-cut formal gown which clung to her slim body like wet tissue paper, outlining every curve.

As I took her light cape I smiled down at her and said, "It's been a long time since so much beauty has graced this hovel."

She smiled back a little strainedly, and moved into the center of the room. As she looked about in womanly curiosity I got the impression she was so tense that she was preventing herself from trembling only by supreme effort.

"Would you like a drink?" I asked.

She gave me a grateful smile. "Please."

I mixed two double bourbons.

I seemed to have guessed correctly about her taut nerves, for she worked through her highball before a quarter of mine was gone. By the time she got down the second, she began to relax.

"What did you want to see me about?" I asked as I handed her a third.

She turned a trifle pink. "Nothing, really. I just couldn't stand to be in the house alone another night. I . . . I suppose I thought I wanted to talk about this horrible plot of George's. But that was just a mental excuse. I really don't want to talk about anything."

I said, "You can't just brush it from your mind. He means to kill you."

"I can brush it from my mind tonight. I thought of nothing else all last night. And I came to a decision."

"What?" I asked.

"I hate him," she said without emotion. "Every bit of love I ever had for him is gone. I want to hurt him in any way I can."

I considered this, finally asked, "And how do you plan to hurt him?"

She gave me a slow smile, all of her previous nervousness now gone, to be replaced by a slightly alcoholic sleepiness. "What's the best way a woman can hurt a man? And enjoy herself at the same time?"

Our eyes locked and I smiled back at her. Apparently my instinctive preparations for the evening had been right after all. Setting down my drink, I walked over to the sofa where she was seated.

She set her glass down, too, turned to move against me. Her lips were on mine before I even started to reach for her.

My guess that George Mathews' straying might be due to his wife's frigidity turned out to be one of the poorest guesses I ever made. It was beyond my comprehension what Mathews was looking for in other women when he had a human bonfire awaiting him at home.

Helen decided she had better leave about midnight. I had never before spent such a pleasantly exhausting evening. While we waited for her cab, she suddenly gave me a tender kiss completely lacking in passion.

"Was this just an interlude, Tom?" she asked. "Or does it have any meaning?"

"It does for me," I said. "My head is spinning like a top."

"My heart is spinning the same way."

I looked down at her, started to open my mouth, but she pressed her fingers against it.

"Don't say anything. I don't want to hear a bachelor

evasion, and I wouldn't believe you if you said you loved me. Let's let it rest."

"I wasn't going to give you a bachelor evasion."

"I still don't want to hear it tonight. Let's sleep on the whole subject."

But I couldn't sleep on it. After she left, I lay awake most of the night visualizing the future prospects the evening made possible.

I didn't try to fool myself into thinking I was in love with Helen on such short acquaintance. But I could be, if I put my mind to it. What more could a man want in a woman? Beauty, passion, money. Particularly money. It was enough to make even a confirmed bachelor like myself consider marriage.

It would be nice to be president of the Schyler Tool Company, work three hours a day and spend the rest of the time sailing that lovely boat of George Mathews'.

—6—

I might have known there would be a catch to any prospect as pleasant as the one I visualized. Helen gently let me know what the catch was the next night.

She phoned me at the office again just before five, and again appeared at my apartment at eight-thirty. The early part of the evening followed the same pattern as the previous one.

"Were you serious last night about being in love?" I asked as we sat side by side on the sofa, sipping drinks.

She gave me a level look. "I don't joke about love."

"Is it the marriage kind of love?"

She grinned at me. "Is that a proposal, or just a request for information?"

"Some of both, probably."

Her face became serious. "It's the marriage kind of love if you reciprocate. I'm not interested in another philandering husband."

I said, "I'm the monogamous type."

"That's not quite enough, Tom. Do you love me?"

I pulled her head against my shoulder and said into her hair, "I love you."

"Completely?"

"Completely."

She was silent for a time. Presently she said in a withdrawn voice, almost as though speaking to herself, "Marriage to me would mean a big chance in your life. Money, social position. George's present job, if you wanted it."

"Hey," I said, "you don't have to parade your wares. It's you I love, not the side products."

"Is it?" she asked.

Cupping her chin, I tilted her head upward. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing," she said. "Only there's the factor to consider that I already have a husband. George has to be disposed of."

I dropped my hand from her chin. "I didn't intend making you a bigamist. That's a simple problem. After you divorce George, we'll get married."

"I don't intend to divorce George."

"What?" I asked.

"I want you to kill him."

I sat up straight. "Kill him! What in the hell for?"

In a voice suddenly so cold with venom it nearly hissed she said, "Because I hate him. I want to do to him what he planned to do to me. I want to watch him die, and make sure he knows I planned it."

I looked at her with my jaw hanging open. A little stupidly I said, "But divorce is so simple, baby. You have all the evidence. . . ."

"You don't know me very well," she interrupted. "I don't do things halfway. I gave George all the love there was in me. And now he has all the hate I'm capable of feeling. If you want me for your wife, you're going to have to kill him. Because you're not going to get me any other way."

She wasn't any more in love with me than I was with her. She was offering herself and the material things which went with her in exchange for vengeance.

I guess it's true that Hell hath no fury such as that of a woman scorned.

I got up and poured myself a straight shot. Then I mixed fresh drinks for both of us.

"So it isn't love after all," I said. "It's just hate for George."

"I told you I love you," she said levelly. "You'll never find any indication that I don't, even if we live to be a hundred." She added with faint mockery in her voice, "In return I expect you never to let me feel you married me just to get George's sinecure, instead of just for myself."

There wasn't any point in further discussion. It was clear from her manner that it was a take-it-or-leave-it proposition.

"I've never committed a felony," I said. "Though I've been guilty of a few misdemeanors. This is a thing I'm going to have to think over long and carefully."

"Then I'll go home and give you time to think," she told me, rising. "Tomorrow is Wednesday, you know, and Friday I leave for the cottage. It doesn't give you much time to plan out details."

For the second night I didn't get any sleep. I didn't even go to bed until nearly time to get up again. I spent the whole night pacing and smoking cigarettes while I balanced in my mind the attractions of being a rich murderer against the attractions of being poor but relatively sinless.

After weighing all the pros and cons, I came to a decision at six-thirty A.M. Then I fell into bed for an hour, rose again, showered and shaved, drank three cups of black coffee and went to the office.

Helen phoned me as usual just before closing time.

"Come to any decision?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Want to drop by tonight about the same time?"

"Is it yes or no?"

"I'll tell you when I see you."

She said, "Why can't you tell me now? If it's no I can save myself the trip and you your bourbon."

I decided it was time to let her know that I had no intention of being a yes-dear husband for the rest of my life. "Be there at eight-thirty," I said, and hung up.

As always she arrived right on the dot. When she came in, she didn't offer me a kiss. She stood just inside the front door, examining me coolly.

"Well?" she asked.

"You win," I said. "I'll kill him for you."

Instantly she was in my arms. Her lips came up to mine with all the fire she had exhibited the first night.

"I love you, darling," she whispered. "You'll never regret it. I'll love you as no man was ever loved before."

—7—

Having reached my decision, the problem now was how to perform the act without getting caught. Helen's insistence on being present at the kill, plus her insistence that Mathews know why he was going to die, complicated matters.

I said, "We're not going to make any of the mistakes your husband would have made if he'd actually gotten around to killing you. He's an utter jerk."

"How do you mean?" Helen asked.

"Buying a gun under an assumed name, for instance. If the gun had ever been located, they'd have traced it back to him within hours."

"How?"

"Because that's all the time it would take to trace it to the pawn shop. And from there on it would be routine. The husband is always automatically a suspect when a woman's murdered. With you as the corpse, they'd march George down to the pawn shop and the proprietor would instantly identify him as the buyer."

"But suppose my . . ." She paused to grimace. ". . . my body had never been recovered?"

"Possibly it wouldn't have been," I admitted. "With six sash weights tied to it. There are a couple of hundred-foot holes in Weed Lake. But if it had been, the weights and cord would have been as easily traceable back to him as the gun. We won't take that sort of chance."

"What will we do?"

"There's only one sure-fire murder method," I said. "A planned accident. The cops can never prove murder in an accident case, even if they suspect it."

"You mean something such as running over him in a car?"

"I mean something such as his falling out of a boat and drowning. While you and he are out fishing."

She frowned. "How could I get him out in a boat? Anyway, it's too dangerous. Suppose he pulled his gun and shot me before you came out of hiding?"

"You don't actually have to go fishing with him," I said. "We just have to make it appear that's what happened. I think I have an idea, but I want to stew over it a while. Why don't you go home and I'll phone you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's Thursday," she reminded me. "We'd better have things worked out by tomorrow night. Because I leave the next morning."

"They're practically worked out now," I told her. "Don't worry about it."

She seemed content with that; she left a few minutes later. I didn't even attempt to think any more that evening. After two sleepless nights, I was interested in nothing but bed. I was asleep fifteen minutes after Helen's departure.

The next day I kept only half my mind on my job, the other half on the problem of how to stage a convincing accidental drowning. By five o'clock, when I phoned Helen, I had all the details worked out in my mind.

"You won't have to drop over tonight," I said. "Everything's set."

"Shouldn't we talk it over?"

"No," I said. "We can discuss it at the cottage."

"When are you coming up?"

"Friday night after work."

She said in a dubious tone, "Suppose he arrives before you do?"

I hadn't thought of that. With Mathews' habit of taking off at two P.M. or earlier, he could drive to the cottage, perform his murder and be gone again before I got there.

I said, "Would he think it funny if you changed plans and didn't start for the cottage until Friday night?"

"He might."

I considered for a moment, then said, "Suppose you leave as planned, but don't drive to the cottage. Spend the day shopping or something. We'll meet somewhere and arrive at the cottage together. Where is your place?"

"Beyond Dune Point, on the west side of the lake."

I placed Dune Point on a mental map. "There's a roadhouse called Gill's Grill on Route Seventeen about a mile past Dune Point. I'll meet you there about seven P.M. By the time I stop home for a bag, it will take me that long, even if I get away from here at five on the dot."

"All right," she said. "I won't see you before then?"

"No," I said. "Let's not chance someone seeing us together."

At five I drove home to pack a weekend bag. I put two articles in it aside from clothing and toilet supplies: a length of strong clothesline and my army automatic.

I reached Gill's Grill at five minutes of seven and found Helen there. We had dinner at the roadhouse before driving back to the cottage.

She led the way in her car. We passed under the white wooden archway marking the entrance to the public beach at Dune Point, turned right on the gravel road which circled the lake, and followed it past two small private beaches clustered with summer cottages. A half mile beyond the

second cluster she turned left into a dirt lane which ended in a strip of white sand at the lake edge.

A white cottage was situated a dozen feet back from the strip of sand. I knew Mathews had not been there because the powdery dust of the lane would have shown his tire tracks.

Weed Lake gets its name from the tremendous amount of seaweed in it, which makes it an excellent breeding ground for muskalonge. Horseshoe-shaped, it is only about five miles long, and nowhere wider than a couple of hundred yards. Yet its average depth is fifty feet and it contains holes over a hundred feet deep. I've seen fifty- and sixty-pound muskie pulled from it.

The Mathews' cottage was on the west side of the horseshoe in a relatively isolated spot. While several other cottages were visible from it, the nearest was a good four hundred yards away on the opposite side of the lake. Heavily-underbrushed timber screened it from view of the cottages on this side.

I made use of the latter to conceal my car fifty yards from the cottage so that, when Mathews drove in, he wouldn't suspect that Helen had company.

The car hidden to my satisfaction, I checked the small boat Mathews used for muskie fishing, a twelve-foot skiff turned bottom up on the beach. The seams all appeared tight enough. Helen showed me its outboard motor, which was stored in a shed attached to the cottage. While she watched for his possible arrival I tinkered with it until it ran smoothly.

The only other immediate preparation necessary was to make sure Mathews couldn't walk in on us unexpectedly while we were asleep. As the cottage contained only one window in each of its three rooms, and there was only one outside door, this didn't present much of a problem. The windows were heavily screened and the door had an inside bolt.

We sat back to wait for him to walk into the trap.

—8—

Before we went to bed that night, I went over my murder plan again with Helen. It was a good plan, having the twin virtues of being simple and foolproof. It's the elaborate plans which put murderers in the electric chair. There's not much the police can do about an apparently accidental drowning even if they suspect murder.

"Can you swim?" I asked her.

When she said that she could, I explained how we could make it seem that she and her husband had been night fishing, tipped over the boat and he drowned.

"We'll pick some lighted cottage," I said. "Tip the boat about fifty yards from it and then yell your head off. You swim toward the cottage; I'll swim back here, jump in my car and take off. It can't fail."

"Suppose he manages to drown you instead of you drowning him?" she suggested.

I grinned at her. It was the one detail I hadn't previously given her. "He's going to be drowned before we go out in the boat. In the bathtub."

While we waited for Mathews to show up, Helen was kept pretty busy getting the cottage ready for occupancy. All we did Friday night was air the place out and start the electric water pump. But Saturday she had a lot to do. In the morning she drove to the shopping center at Dune Point to lay in a supply of groceries. She spent the afternoon thoroughly cleaning the cottage, even washing the windows.

All this was necessary because I wanted it to look as though she was planning on her husband and herself spending a several-day vacation there.

Mathews arrived Sunday evening.

I was lolling on the beach in swim trunks only a few yards from the cottage when I heard his car engine. Helen was inside preparing dinner. The instant I heard the car turn into the lane, I leaped up and headed for the cottage at a dead run.

I was inside before he came into view.

Helen, wearing nothing but a bathing suit, nervously wiped moist hands on her stomach and peered out the kitchen window to where her husband was parking his car next to hers. She was deathly pale.

"Take it easy," I cautioned, quietly moving into the bedroom.

Getting my automatic from my bag, I checked the load, then pressed my back against the wall next to the door and waited. After a few moments I heard the screen door slam as Mathews came into the house.

"Hi, honey," I heard him say. "I decided to run up tonight instead of tomorrow. What are you fixing?"

"Just cold cuts and potato salad," she said in a steady voice. "It's too hot to cook. Go put something comfortable on and I'll feed you. I was all ready to sit down."

"Be with you in five minutes," he said cheerfully, and headed toward the bedroom whistling.

He walked right past me without seeing my figure flattened against the wall alongside the door, dropped his weekend bag on the bed and struggled out of his suit coat.. He dropped his coat on the bed, started to loosen his tie, and then, turning, spotted me.

He froze in position, his gaze on the automatic leveled at his belt.

"What's this?" he asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Just keep undressing," I said. "Right down to your shorts."

"Are you crazy?" he asked. "Have you switched from blackmail to housebreaking? How'd you get in here without Helen seeing you?"

I grinned at him. "She knows I'm here. Do what I tell you, or I'll put a bullet in your guts."

Flipping off the safety, I let the grin fade from my face. He raised a hand, palm out.

"Don't get excited, Cavanaugh. I'll do what you say."

He stripped off his shirt and trousers.

"The shoes, too," I ordered.

Stooping, he unlaced his brightly polished shoes and kicked them off.

"Now get into your favorite fishing clothes," I said.

For a moment he looked at me blankly, then turned and walked to the closet. He put on a faded T-shirt, worn denim trousers and some scuffed loafers. In this outfit he no longer looked like a business executive.

"Now let's go sit down to dinner," I suggested.

Helen was backed against the sink when we entered the kitchen with my gun pressed into Mathews' back. In a high voice he said to her, "What's this all about, honey?"

There was the same high tension in her I had noted on her first visit to my apartment. She gave the impression that, if she didn't restrain herself, she would go into a violent fit of trembling. She said nothing, merely stared at her husband without expression.

I said to Mathews, "Sit at the table and don't ask questions."

Seating himself, he looked puzzledly from one to the other of us.

"All right," I told Helen. "Serve him up some dinner."

Quietly she filled a plate with cold cuts, potato salad and sliced tomatoes. Putting it in front of him, she moved butter and rolls within his reach and poured him a cup of coffee. Then she moved back against the sink.

"Eat," I ordered.

"Why?" Mathews asked. "What is this?"

"A game," I said. "Either eat or get shot."

He looked at me a little belligerently, decided I meant it and reluctantly began to eat.

Halfway through his plate, he asked with an attempt at nonchalance, "Aren't you two going to have anything?"

"Later," I said. "Just keep quiet and eat."

I didn't see any point in informing him that the reason I wanted food in his stomach was in the event of an autopsy.

It might just strike the medical examiner as strange that Mathews had skipped dinner entirely and had gone night fishing on an empty stomach. I suspected Mathews might lose his appetite if he knew why I was so insistent that he eat.

All the time he was eating, Helen stood with her back against the sink, watching him from unwinking eyes. Aside from her paleness and rigid bearing, there was no indication of emotion in her.

By then Mathews must have figured out that his wife and I were lovers; but I believe he thought I had pulled a gun because I panicked when he caught me alone in the cottage with her. I don't think it occurred to him that we'd deliberately set a trap. Possibly he thought I was holding him under a gun merely as a time-gaining device while I tried to decide what to do about being caught in a compromising position.

I'm sure he didn't suspect for a moment we meant to kill him, or he would never have eaten as well as he did. He seemed puzzled rather than frightened, and more amazed at his wife's infidelity than angry.

When he finished eating, I ordered him back into the bedroom. Helen followed us to the doorway and watched as I commanded Mathews to lie face down on the bed.

When he had complied, I said, "Put your hands behind your back."

Thrusting the gun under the belt of my swim trunks, where I could get at it instantly if Mathews made any unexpected move, I securely tied his hands and feet with the clothesline I had brought along.

When I finished, he inquired in a pettish voice, "What do you two expect to accomplish by all this nonsense? Maybe I'd be willing to discuss a reasonable divorce settlement if you weren't behaving so idiotically."

Ignoring him, I said to Helen, "It's only a little past six-thirty and it won't be dark until nine. We ought to wait until

an hour after dark, which gives us three and a half hours. Those knots are tight enough to keep him. Let's get things ready."

Something in my tone seemed to tell Mathews for the first time that his treatment wasn't just spur-of-the-moment action on our part. He twisted around to stare at his wife with growing understanding. His eyes had a strained look.

"What's gotten into you, honey?" he asked in a voice which cracked slightly. "You're not planning anything foolish, are you?"

Without answering him, Helen turned and left the room. I followed, pulling the door closed behind me and leaving Mathews alone with his thoughts.

—9—

Leading Helen down to the beach, I had her help me heave the boat over right side up and slide the stern into the water. Then I sent her after fishing gear while I clamped on the outboard motor and laid a set of oars in the bottom.

Helen returned from the house with a tackle box and two fishing rods.

"Do you have a Coleman lantern?" I asked.

Entering the shed attached to the cottage, she brought me a gasoline lantern which had a bolt welded to its bottom to fit into one of the oarlocks. Pumping it up, I lighted it, then shut it off again as soon as I knew it would work.

Helen spoke for the first time since I had forced her husband into the kitchen at gunpoint. "Why do we have to do all this now, if we aren't going to need the boat until ten?"

"I want it all set to shove off," I said. "I want George in the lake as soon after he's dead as possible. We can't risk an autopsy showing he drowned an hour or more before you yelled for help. Now, the large bucket."

My abrupt change of direction befuddled her. She gave me a confused look and asked, "What?"

"The bucket. For carrying the water. To carry water from the lake. To fill the bathtub."

She looked even more confused. "Not from the tap?"

I said, "An analysis of the water in his lungs would show he drowned in tap water instead of lake water. I told you. This is going to be a foolproof murder."

Some of the confusion left her and her expression became one of grudging respect. "I wouldn't have thought of that."

She brought two four-gallon buckets from the shed. Wading knee-deep into the lake, I filled both and carried them ashore. I refused her offer to carry one, preferring to have her go ahead of me to open doors.

When we walked into the bedroom, we found Mathews lying on his stomach as we had left him. His eyes followed us as we marched to the bathroom.

When Helen had inserted the drain plug, I emptied both buckets. It was a long, old-fashioned tub on legs; the nearly eight gallons of water filled it only a couple of inches.

"This is going to take a number of trips," I said.

It took five, nearly forty gallons of water, before it came up to the level of the overflow drain. And each time we walked through the room, the look of horror on George Mathews' face increased.

It was obvious to me that Mathews had figured out why we were filling the bathtub, and the way Helen's eyes glittered at her husband each time we trooped past made it equally obvious that she obtained considerable sadistic pleasure from his mental suffering. She even tried to prolong the ordeal by suggesting, ostensibly out of concern for me, that it would be easier if I carried only one bucket at a time.

But Mathews' murder was only a job to me, not a mission of revenge. In spite of my dislike of the man, I found myself feeling a little sorry for him. I continued to carry the double load.

The whole procedure was carried on in dead silence, neither of us speaking either to each other or to Mathews,

and Mathews not once opening his mouth. At least not while I was present.

When the tub was full, I returned the buckets to the shed. Reentering the cottage, I discovered that Mathews had finally broken the prolonged silence. Helen stood in the bedroom doorway looking at him.

"He knows what's coming," she said to me in a flat voice. "He's been pleading with me to untie him. He thinks this is all your idea."

I checked his bonds and found them as tight as ever. Apparently he'd done a little struggling for his wrists were slightly chafed, but he hadn't succeeded in loosening the knots. I loosened them somewhat, not enough for him to pull his hands free, but enough to allow freer circulation, kneaded his wrists for a minute and tightened the bonds again.

This wasn't solely out of the goodness of my heart. I didn't want the rope marks to show after he was dead.

Suddenly Mathews said with a peculiar mixture of eagerness and despair, "Listen, Cavanaugh, I'll give Helen a divorce, if that's what you want."

"She doesn't want a divorce," I told him. "I suggested that myself. She wants revenge."

"Revenge for what?" he asked on a high note. "Helen, I never did anything to you."

The glitter I had periodically noted before appeared in Helen's eyes again. Approaching the bed, she squatted on her heels so that her face was nearly level with his.

"Think about your hot little mistress, Gertie Drake," she nearly hissed at him. "Maybe it will make you feel better when you begin to suck in water."

Mathews' gaze moved sickly from his wife to me, then back again. Knowing it was useless to deny Gertie's existence, he tried another tack.

"Cavanaugh told you about Gertie just to turn you against me, honey. Because he wants you for himself. I admit I played with her a little, but it's all over. I swear it.

After this past weekend I never intended to see her again. You have to believe me."

Helen's lips curled in the expression of a cat getting ready to spit. Reaching down, I drew her to her feet before she could speak.

"It's only seven-thirty," I said. "We've two hours to wait and we're not going to spend it goading the man. Come out of here now."

Her eyes continued to glitter back toward her husband, but she let herself be led from the room.

"Wait!" Mathews called desperately as we reached the door. "Can't we talk this over?"

Propelling Helen into the kitchen, I closed the door behind us. But not in time to cut off the long, drawn-out sob that came from the doomed man.

In the kitchen Helen stared at me almost accusingly, as though I had somehow spoiled her pleasure.

"How about a couple of sandwiches, or at least a cup of coffee," I said tactfully. "We haven't had any dinner."

Wordlessly she turned toward the stove.

She fixed a plate of sandwiches, but the prospect of the task ahead had driven the appetite from both of us. A couple of nibbles was all I could manage, and Helen didn't even attempt that. We settled for coffee.

The next two hours dragged interminably. After that one short period in the bedroom when she had momentarily lost control and started to upbraid her husband, Helen showed no desire to go near him. Periodically I went in to loosen his bonds for a moment, but otherwise we left him to his own thoughts.

These didn't seem to be very pleasant. He had sunk into a sort of hopeless lethargy, just lying inert and waiting for the inevitable. He made no attempt to speak to me when I was in the room, or even to look at me.

At nine-thirty I said to Helen, "Better put on whatever you customarily wear fishing."

Her face grew still. Then she rose from the table and

moved toward the bedroom. Following, I stood in the doorway and watched as she took a blue cotton blouse and a pair of blue jeans from her closet and laid them on the bed next to Mathews. From a dresser drawer she obtained a bra and panties, laid them with the other clothing.

For a time she stood looking down at her husband expressionlessly. Then, slowly, deliberately, she peeled off her swimming suit.

—10—

It was an exquisite bit of torture such as only a feminine mind could conceive. She was fully conscious of the beauty of her body, and was giving Mathews a last look at what he no longer possessed. At the same time, by so casually stripping in front of me, she was flaunting our relationship in his face.

The demonstration succeeded in rousing Mathews from his hopeless stupor. Momentarily his nostrils flared in shocked and impotent rage. Then the flame died and he only looked sick.

Taking her time, Helen dressed in her fishing costume. She didn't put on shoes, apparently in the habit of fishing barefoot.

Approaching the bed, I got an arm under Mathews' chest and another around his legs. Understandably enough, he refused to cooperate, wriggling in his bonds so much that I couldn't lift him.

"I guess you'll have to help," I told Helen. "Take his legs and I'll take his head."

Together we managed to get him off the bed. He began to plead: "Don't do it, for God's sake," he said in a near whimper as we carried him into the bathroom. "Please, Helen! For God's sake, Cavanaugh! Don't do it. I'll do anything you want. I'll disappear, never bother you again."

We got him suspended over the tub, when suddenly he

began to scream. He renewed his struggles too, so violently that we nearly dropped him.

Falling to one knee, I lowered the upper part of his body into the water while Helen, desperately holding onto his threshing legs, tried to help guide him downward. The screaming stopped abruptly as I shoved his head under the water.

I was conscious that behind me it was only with effort that Helen was able to hold his legs still as he fought for his life.

After what seemed an eon, but was probably only a matter of seconds, there was a rather horrible gurgling sound, and his threshing grew weaker and weaker until it stopped altogether.

I stood up and looked at Helen. Releasing Mathews' legs, she backed unsteadily to the door and leaned against it, needing its support. Mathews slid a little farther forward into the tub, his knees flopped past the inside edge and his legs made such a loud splash, we both jumped.

Helen kept staring at the tub. She began to shake uncontrollably.

I found that I didn't want to look at her. Leaning over Mathews, I untied his hands and feet, put the rope in my pocket. A slight choking sound made me look up.

Helen still leaned against the door, and now tears were streaming down her face. "He's dead, isn't he?" she said in a near-hysterical whimper.

"You wanted him that way," I said sharply. "Get hold of yourself. It's a little late to cry now."

"He's dead," she repeated dully, "I'll never see him again."

Walking over to her, I took her by her arms and gave her a slight shake. "If you go to pieces now, we're both finished, Helen. You've still got a big role to play."

She gazed at me sightlessly and repeated again in the same dull tone, "He's dead. We killed him."

Deliberately I brought my palm across her face in a

stinging slap. Shock replaced the dullness in her eyes and she looked at me incredulously.

"Sorry," I said. "Just an antidote for hysteria. You all right now?"

Her hand felt her cheek and she continued to stare at me. Then, abruptly, her shoulders slumped and she said in a small voice, "I'll be all right."

"Then let's get moving. The faster we work now, the better our chances are of beating the electric chair."

That completed her recovery, which is why I said it. Up to now Helen's mind had been too full of vengeance to think of consequences. A gentle reminder of what we were both up against if we didn't make this a perfect job might keep her mind on her work.

It did. All of a sudden she became eager to help me.

It proved unexpectedly difficult to get the body down to the boat. Even when he was struggling, alive, Mathews had seemed lighter than he did as dead weight. In addition it was too dark out to see where we were going, for there was no moon. Twice during the short trip Helen stubbed her bare toes on rocks, fell to her knees and dropped Mathews' legs, nearly jerking me off balance.

We were both panting and covered with perspiration when we finally got him settled in the bottom of the boat.

"You bring any matches?" I asked.

Helen shook her head.

That necessitated my first trip back to the cottage. I had Helen seated amidship and was just getting ready to shove off when I noticed two lights on the water three or four hundred yards north of us. I hadn't taken into consideration the possibility that there might be other night fishermen out tonight, but now it occurred to me that we would be in a fine fix if another boat came close enough to see into ours.

I made another trip to the cottage for a blanket to throw over the corpse.

Then, finally, we were away from shore. I lit the Cole-

man lantern and started the outboard motor. I would have preferred to move in darkness but was afraid that an unlighted boat would attract more attention than our light.

At slow speed I headed offshore and south, away from the two stationary lights to the north. Some five hundred yards south on the far side of the lake I spotted a lighted cottage. I headed toward it.

We hadn't moved fifty yards when a gasoline lantern suddenly flared fifty yards ahead of us on our own side of the lake.

Then a voice called, "Hey, Mathews! That you?"

In panic I glanced toward the small boat just leaving shore, then was relieved to see that I couldn't make out the appearance of either occupant in it. It followed that they couldn't make us out clearly.

"Who is it?" I whispered to Helen.

"John Blake, our nearest neighbor," she whispered back. "And probably his oldest son."

"Hey, Mathews!" the voice repeated, and the boat headed toward us.

Slightly revving the motor to hide the tone of my voice, I shouted, "Hi, John. Bet I land one before you do." Then I threw the throttle wide and sped away.

Even with the lighted cottage, I cut the motor in the center of the lake, which left us about a hundred yards from it.

"Sure you can swim a hundred yards?" I asked Helen.

She merely nodded.

"All right," I said. "Let's capsize it."

Cautiously I moved until I was seated on the gunwale, then motioned for Helen to follow suit. She moved just as cautiously, and her added weight caused that side of the boat to tip until water began to drip over the side.

I rocked forward gently, and Helen rocked in rhythm with me. On the back rock quite a lot of water was shipped.

"Now!" I said.

Together we threw all our weight forward, then backward, and the boat upturned. When I came to the surface,

Helen's head bobbed up within three feet of me.

"You all right?" I asked.

She blew water from her mouth, gasped, "Yes."

"Then start screaming," I said. "Then swim for that lighted cottage. Phone me at my apartment when things quiet down."

With a strong stroke I headed back toward the Mathews' cottage.

—II—

Before I was a dozen yards away Helen began to cry for help. By the time a searchlight near the lighted cottage went on and began to sweep the water, I was a good fifty yards away. I had to dive once, when the probing beam threatened to touch me, but then it picked up Helen and the overturned boat and stopped searching.

I looked back to see a boat leave shore and Helen begin to swim toward it.

No one spotted me during my long swim back to Helen's cottage, though a couple of boats speeding toward the cries for help passed not very far off. Twenty minutes after capsizing the boat I was dressed, had my bag packed and was headed for my car concealed in the underbrush.

By midnight I was safely in bed in my own apartment, with no one but Helen aware that I'd stirred from it during the entire weekend.

Monday when I went to work the plant was in an uproar. The news of Mathews' drowning had been in the morning paper.

My stenographer couldn't wait to tell me about it. I had no more than walked in the door when she thrust the paper at me and said with a mixture of sadness and relish, "Did you see this about the big boss, Mr. Cavanaugh?"

Mathews' social importance made it a page-one item, but the story got routine handling. It simply reported the drown-

ing, added that Mrs. Mathews had nearly drowned at the same time.

There was no intimation that his death might have been anything other than an accident.

I made some discreetly appropriate sounds of regret to my stenographer, then shut up to let her do the talking.

"I wonder how Gertie Drake's taking it?" the girl speculated. "I'll bet she saw the item, because she hasn't come in yet."

Later in the day I learned that Gertie never did come to work. Ordinarily someone from the office would have phoned to inquire why an employee didn't show up, but in tacit conspiracy Gertie's absence was simply ignored. Everyone at the office assumed she wanted to be alone with her grief.

By Tuesday the plant started to get back to normal. Having been only a figurehead boss, Mathews' absence failed to disrupt operations in the slightest, old Lyman Schyler's team of assistants carrying on as efficiently as usual. Aside from a little speculation as to who would inherit Mathews' title of company president, discussion of his death pretty well died down.

On Wednesday it revived again because a half holiday was declared for the purpose of allowing company employees to attend the funeral. I went myself but stayed at the rear of the church, not even going forward to offer the widow sympathy.

I saw no point in it inasmuch as, as far as anyone knew, Helen and I had never met.

I looked for Gertie Drake at the funeral but failed to spot her.

Thursday the plant was operating just as though George Mathews had never existed. Gertie Drake still had not showed up.

And I hadn't heard a word from Helen.

When I still hadn't heard from her by Friday evening

I took the chance of phoning. Her voice sounded cool and distant.

"I thought you were going to phone me," I said.

"So soon?" she asked. "You said when things died down."

"Everything went smoothly, didn't it? You weren't asked any unpleasant questions?"

"No," she said. "There wasn't any trouble."

"Then things *have* died down. Why don't you drop over?"

"Tonight?"

"Of course tonight."

She was some time answering me, and when she did, the delay may have made me imagine the reluctance in her voice. However, the words were agreeable enough.

"Eight-thirty, as usual," she said.

For the first time, she failed to be prompt, arriving ten minutes late. When I kissed her hello, her response was about as torrid as a bronze statue's.

"What's the matter?" I asked, examining her closely. "Thinking of reneging on our deal now that I've done my part?"

"Of course not," she said quickly, moved into my arms and gave me a more enthusiastic kiss.

But I could tell it was simulated enthusiasm.

I thought: *It isn't going to work. She doesn't want to keep her bargain.*

I asked, "How soon do you think it would be safe to marry?"

She answered so quickly I knew she had the reply all prepared. "A year is conventional, isn't it?"

"I was figuring about three months," I said. "A year of widow's weeds went out with Queen Victoria."

"Do we have to discuss it now?"

"I guess it can ride for a few days," I told her.

When she was ready to leave, I said, "You know, we never looked in George's car for that .32 and the sash weights. Or have you?"

She shook her head. "One of the sheriff's deputies drove George's car back to town for me. It's in the garage at home. Should I take the gun and weights out and dispose of them?"

I shrugged. "They don't point to anything. Do as you please."

Later that night, well past midnight, she phoned me.

In a worried voice she said, "Tom, there isn't any gun or sash weights in George's car. What do you think happened to them?"

"He must have had them in the car when he arrived at the cottage," I said. "Could that deputy who drove the car back to town have removed them somehow?"

"I don't see how. He followed me into town. He wasn't out of sight of my rearview mirror all the way."

"Well, it isn't anything to worry about," I assured her. "The stuff only points to George's unfulfilled intentions, not to us."

"I suppose," she said dubiously. "But it's certainly mysterious."

After she hung up, I brooded over it a long time. Despite my telling Helen it was nothing to worry about, it worried me considerably. In the back of my mind, I began to form an uneasy suspicion about where the items were.

The Schyler Tool Company was closed on Saturday, but nevertheless I was up early. By nine A.M. I was at the rooming house where Gertie Drake lived.

The stout, middle-aged woman who answered the door said, "Gertie Drake? Sorry, mister. She's home on vacation."

"Oh?" I said. "Where's home?"

When the woman scowled suspiciously, I gave her my most charming smile and said, "I'm not a bill collector or a process server. I'm a personal friend. I just wanted to ask her out to dinner."

"Oh," she said. After examining me carefully, she seemed to decide I was all right. "Coral Grove's her home.

Four twenty-three Warsaw Drive. I imagine the phone number's in the book. It'd be under her father's name. Henry Drake."

Coral Grove was practically a suburb of Raine City, being only ten miles away. Instead of driving there, I phoned. A man answered.

"Gertie there?" I asked.

"Gertie? She hasn't lived here for years. Rooms in Raine City."

"Yes, I know. But she isn't home, and I thought she might be visiting you."

"Well, she ain't," the man said. "I ought to know. I'm her father."

"Sorry I bothered you," I said, and hung up.

I know where Gertie Drake is. There's only one possible explanation for her telling her landlady she was going home for a time, when her father knew nothing about the proposed visit. She must have made the excuse to cover a contemplated secret vacation with George Mathews. And since Mathews had no intention of being with her beyond the weekend, he must have suggested that she make the excuse in order to delay the report that she was missing.

Gertie Drake is somewhere in the lake with six sash weights tied to her body.

Even if the body is never recovered, eventually she is bound to be reported missing. And then Helen is going to realize what I already know: that her husband meant to kill to retain her—to keep her love—not to get rid of her.

Whether we're married or not, what then? Will she go to the police with the whole story? I'm afraid she will. I've got to be afraid that she will. How else be sure of my own neck?

How else except to kill Helen? Kill her before Gertie Drake is reported missing.

ANTIQUE

Hal Ellson

CURTAINS, DUSTY AND FRAGILE with age, darkened the somber rooms of the house. The climate was glacial. Only the kitchen contained any warmth at all. Lena sat in that retreat. Age had watered her eyes and dimmed their luster, her jowls sagged, all the flesh on her frame conceded to the same terrible affliction. Picked clean of the last shred of meat, a few chicken bones lay on her plate. A glass of whiskey stood beside them. Tomorrow the soup pot would claim the bones, the whiskey was to warm her now.

She eyed it, lifted the glass, emptied it quickly and came alert to the footsteps on the stairs. Ray, her dead sister's husband, was coming down. Quickly she put the whiskey glass in the closet and sat again as the door opened. Behind her, footsteps sounded in the foyer.

He doesn't knock any more, she thought, resenting this familiarity. He entered the kitchen, greeted her. She looked up and nodded, glad for his company now that he was here. He took a chair at the opposite end of the table and sent her a searching look. She'd been drinking again, and there was no whiskey for him. He nodded to the bones on the plate, noting how she'd stripped them clean, and remarked that she was eating a late lunch, intimating a slight rebuke.

"I didn't think you were coming," she said.

"Ah, I wouldn't disappoint you, but I got to thinking upstairs that I've been making a pest of myself."

"But I enjoy your company," said Lena. "Oh, the way this house once was, all the visitors, parties, wonderful times. It's not been the same since Philip died."

"True," Roy admitted, thinking of her husband. It was

ten years since he'd passed on, and Lena had aged frightfully, but worse were her ways, particularly with money. A wonder she can spare the beer, he told himself, and caught her gaze.

"A penny for your thoughts?" she said.

He shrugged the question off, complained of the chill in the house and wondered how she stood it. The stove had gone out because the coal was worthless, she said, like everything new. When he tried to explain that all coal was old, she ignored him and vehemently attacked the present. It was an age of cheapness and shoddiness.

He smiled. She didn't understand. Once more he tried to explain the genesis and nature of coal. The attempt was futile. She cut him off, and he surrendered to her ignorance and senility. "All right. I won't dispute the point," he said. "But are you going to sit here and freeze?"

She glanced at the stove and decided it was too much bother to start a fire. They could sit in the dining room. "Another icebox," he countered.

She agreed to light the oil stove, and led him to the dining room. Once there, Ray gazed at the room, which was a veritable museum crowded with antiques, many of them valuable. More were in the parlor, and packed away in the cellar. Collecting dust, he thought, nodding.

Lena caught this and asked him what was wrong. "Nothing," he lied. "I was just looking at your antiques."

"There's so many. I can't take care of them all. I haven't the strength any more. Ah, it's a shame to neglect such beautiful things, so sad. But what else can I do?"

"Couldn't you sell them? You'd make it a lot easier for yourself," he suggested, and she looked at him aghast. Everything that belonged here would remain. As for the money, she wasn't in need of it.

Which was true. He glanced at the huge diamonds sparkling on her fingers. She saw the look in his eye and qualified her statement. She wasn't in need, but neither was she rich. It was an old defense.

The old hag. Who does she think she's fooling? And, damn it, where's the beer? To wait like this irritated him, but she wasn't to be hurried. She'd had her whiskey already and her blood ran warm, even if her mind was no longer alert. Whiskey and senility made a bad mixture. He saw her watching him again.

She invited him to a glass of beer, laughed when he quickly accepted and arose from her chair, a bit unsteady on her thin wasted legs. He didn't miss that. Probably she'd been hitting the bottle all morning. He watched her to the kitchen, then got to his feet and crossed the room to a shadowed corner. A group of figurines stood on a rack. There was no time for selection. He picked the nearest and dropped it in his pocket.

Footsteps warned him, the chair he'd been sitting in was too distant. He moved to the sideboard, where crystal sparkled, two tall decanters of beautiful design, one amber, the other a dark rich red.

Lena entered the room with a bottle and two glasses. She set the glasses on the table, filled them and looked at Roy. "I've been admiring your decanters," he said.

She sat and nodded. "They're beautiful. You don't see anything like them any more, do you?"

"Hardly." He returned to his chair, and she reached for her glass. "Philip gave them to me when we were first married," she sighed. "In the old days they were always filled with the best sherry, the finest port."

"No one to speak of drinks sherry or port any more," said Roy, lifting his glass of beer and saluting Lena. She toasted to the old days, and they drank. Later, she raised her dress, took a key from a petticoat pocket and asked if he wanted another bottle. He didn't mind in the least, and she gave him the key which was for the cellar door. "You'll find the beer in the back. I don't trust myself on the stairs of late," she said.

He promised to be up in a jiffy and headed for the cellar door, still amazed that she'd given him the key. It was proof

she was doddering. He smiled to himself, paused at the bottom of the cellar stairs, took the figurine from his pocket and examined it. Next, he examined the cellar. Two bins, both locked, contained heaven knew what. A half dozen trunks lined a wall, old furniture, oil lamps, dishware, glasses, statues, items of every description filled every available inch of space.

In the rear, a door stood ajar. He entered a bin, and row after row of dusty bottles met his eye. He took two and went back upstairs. "I thought you lost yourself," Lena said as he entered the dining room.

"I almost did. How do you find your way down there with all that junk?"

"It may be dusty, but it's hardly junk. All my best things are there."

"If they are, they must be rotting away."

"No more than I am," Lena said with a laugh. "But that's enough about them. Pour me a glass."

He obliged. They soon finished the bottle, opened the second and topped it off. By this time the room had grown warm, and Roy had had his fill. He got to his feet, said he was leaving. Lena merely nodded, but when he turned to the door, she asked for her key. Senile or not, he knew one thing, she wasn't giving him free access to the cellar.

Still, he'd fooled her, for the figurine was still in his pocket. Off he went to an antiques dealer named O'Mara. Once in the shop, he set the figurine on a counter and asked for an offer. O'Mara examined it and offered ten dollars.

"Are you crazy, man? It's worth a good deal more," said Roy, but he was talking. He had no idea of the figurine's worth. O'Mara admitted it was a beautiful piece, and raised his offer to fifteen. Roy demanded twenty, but conceded when O'Mara dropped three crisp fives on the counter.

Out he went with the money clasped tight in his fist. It wasn't much, but he was out of work at the moment. In fact, it was something he avoided whenever possible, so the

money was a windfall and there was more to come with so many antiques in Lena's house.

Two days later he called on her again. She was eating in the kitchen and offered him nothing. When she finished, they went into the dining room. He wasn't his usual self, his cockiness had deserted him and he waited nervously for her to mention the figurine. When she failed to, he realized she didn't know what she owned and he felt lifted. She gave him the key to bring up some beer from the cellar.

Several hours later he left, with another figurine tucked in a pocket. Straight as an arrow he went to O'Mara's shop and this time was disappointed. O'Mara offered him five for the figurine, raised it to ten and ended the dickering. "It's not worth a cent more," he explained. "I'm going overboard."

"Sure, you are," said Roy, but he accepted the money and stalked toward the door.

The next day he dropped in on Lena, without any qualms. As usual, she was in the kitchen and looking morose. This didn't disturb him. "The fire out?" he said as she looked up with gray, watery eyes. "Good heaven, don't be afraid to spend a little on the heat. No wonder you look so miserable."

"The heat's the least of my worries," she answered, drawing her shawl tighter.

"Worries? You've had everything and got everything. What more could you want?"

She stared at him as if she hadn't heard, arose from the table, entered the dining room and sat in her ancient rocker.

"You're not putting the heater on?" he asked.

"Light it for me. I don't feel well."

He obliged and looked up with a grin on his liquor-flushed face. Lena's was ashen. "What is it?" he said. "Go on, say it. Sure, I've been drinking."

"That's your business, and it does no harm. But that's not what's on my mind. Two of my figurines are gone," she said, pointing across the room.

With the drinks in him he wasn't upset. "Someone took them? Come on, Lena. That's not so. You probably misplaced them. With all the stuff you have in this house, it's a wonder you know where anything is."

"But I do know. Nothing's been moved in years and I know exactly where everything is."

Roy nodded, face serious, a bit nervous, but still brazen. "Well, I'm your best vistor. Maybe I took them."

She shook her head. "Not you, Roy. I hope you don't think I'd put it on you?"

"Of course not," he said, grinning again. "But I've a good idea what happened."

Unable to follow, Lena frowned and asked him to explain. He suggested a beer first. She was in no mood, but it was part of the ritual. She handed him the key to the cellar and down he went for a bottle. Returning, he poured two glasses and said, "I better not bring it up. You wouldn't want to hear it from me so I'll be quiet."

His play only roused her curiosity. "If you have something to say, say it," she told him.

He sighed deliberately. "All right. Perhaps it's for the best. You're getting on. You were eighty last month, and your mind isn't so sharp. You forget little things. Then the important things."

Her nostrils flared. "If you're thinking I'm beginning to dodder, you've another think coming," she snapped.

He smiled and told her not to be angry, that, if one lived long enough, this happened. Not to her, she answered, but a strange look came into her eyes. She was frightened.

He noticed and said, "You don't want to admit it, but you did forget where you put those figurines." He patted her shoulder. "No need to worry. They're somewhere in the house, aren't they?"

With both fear and confusion in her eyes, she stared at him and finally nodded. "I suppose I did misplace them," she said in a voice barely above a whisper.

"There, you see. It's nothing to be bothered about. You'll run into them in a closet or trunk."

"And suppose I don't?" Her helplessness made him smile. Everything was working as he'd wanted it. "Don't worry. Better have some more beer," he urged her. "It'll do you good."

When she agreed, he went down to the cellar, examined it, and discovered a trunk with an enormous lock. His heart pounded. This was where she kept the real stuff, he decided, and tried the lock. Its strength added to his conviction. Smiling, he brought up four bottles of beer, entered the dining room and found Lena with her head bowed. "Ah, now, this'll straighten you," he said, opening the first bottle.

It took an hour to do away with the four quart bottles. By that time, what with the liquor he'd had before dropping in, Roy was drunk but alert enough to know what he was doing. As for Lena, she was in no condition to leave her rocker; her eyes were closing.

"Better sleep," he suggested, and she nodded. Her chin fell to her chest, her breath came in heavy rasps.

"I'm going now, Lena."

No answer. He grinned and stood up, with the key to the cellar in his pocket, but he needed one for the trunk. A ring of keys hung in the kitchen. He took them and left, but didn't go directly to the cellar. Too wise for that, he went upstairs, waited and came down.

There was no trouble getting into the cellar. The trunk was another matter. None of the keys would fit the lock. Again and again he tried them, then went to the bin where the beer was kept. Greedily he emptied a bottle, flung the useless keys aside and struck a huge jug. The sound made him flinch. He waited, listening for footsteps. The house remained silent. He began to search the cellar and finally found a hammer.

Swaying, he returned to the trunk and took the lock in his palm, for it was an old trick that he knew, to strike a

lock sharply and spring it without damaging it so that it could be snapped shut again, with no one the wiser. A blow of the hammer accomplished nothing. Again he struck; the lock stayed closed. He listened now, heard nothing. His whole body was quaking. He raised the hammer, struck again, and the lock sprang open.

Quickly he removed it, lifted the top and his jaw dropped. The trunk was empty. He swore, and a sound made him turn. There stood Lena, eyes gray and watery, face ashen, flesh sagging. Swaying, he stared at her, then said, "What do you want, you old witch?"

Softly she asked for her keys. "When you let me have the money you've hidden and the diamonds Philip left you," he said. Quietly she repeated herself, then suddenly she pushed him and over he toppled into the trunk, with his legs sticking out. As he tried to rise, she lifted the bottle he'd emptied and smashed him over the head. He groaned and fell back, with his legs still out of the trunk. She tucked them in, closed the lid, snapped the lock and listened.

Not a sound from the trunk, the whole house seemed terribly empty and silent. She blinked her gray, watery eyes and appeared in a daze, but finally she moved. Her eyes brightened, jowls trembled as she bent to the trunk. Her voice was only a whisper, but there was anger in it. "You dirty ungrateful whelp. You thief," she said. "You can come out when you tell what you did with my two figurines."

When he didn't reply, she mumbled, "You'll stay there till you find your tongue," and went to the bin where she kept her beer. With a bottle clutched in her hands, she went upstairs, poured for herself and sat down in her rocker.

Gray light penetrated the dusty curtains, the pale gold liquid in the glass seemed tarnished. She watched the bubbles rising, finally picked up the glass and set it down. Again the house seemed terribly empty and silent. Ah, it's not good to be drinking alone. Where's Roy? she wondered. He ought to be here by now.

MRS. GILLY AND THE GIGOLO

Mary L. Roby

Mrs. Gilly was accustomed to buying whatever she needed to make life comfortable. Therefore, when it became necessary to make her husband jealous, she did not hesitate to hire a gigolo.

His name was Anthony Powers, and he was much more appealing than Mr. Gilly had been even in his most balmy days. His hair was smooth and dark and his eyes were of the glistening variety. He stood well over five-foot-ten.

All of this compared favorably with Mr. Gilly, who had very little hair, weak and watery eyes, and stood only five-foot-four.

However, Mr. Gilly had power, position, and money; Anthony Powers had nothing but his charm and his good looks. Because of this, Mrs. Gilly found him boring in the extreme, but she kept up a facade of gushing girlhood in his presence because she hated to admit she was not getting her money's worth.

It had been necessary for her to involve herself with this oily young man because of Mr. Gilly's sudden and inexplicable entanglement with a young secretary at one of his offices. It was the usual story. He no longer came home directly at five as he had during all their married life. Friends had told her they had seen him dining and dancing with the girl at expensive night spots. Some wives would have crumpled into a ball and had a good cry, or gone on a buying spree. Not Mrs. Gilly. She had decided she would make her husband jealous, or die trying.

She had found Anthony Powers at one of those dusty agencies which specialize in such commodities. And, in the beginning, he had been a very accommodating boy. He had

arrived to pick her up in the evenings in perfectly acceptable evening clothes, and had known how to order at the best restaurants. Of course, what he was stood out all over him. But, considering her age and general lack of anything that could remotely be called glamour, Mrs. Gilly thought he was rather a find.

It took a great deal of doing, but she finally managed to put in an appearance with Anthony at the same restaurant where her husband and the little redhead were dining. Mr. Gilly had obviously lost his appetite at the first sight of them, and that night when they had both reached the privacy of their adjoining bedrooms they had decided that kind of philandering on both their parts had to come to an end.

"We don't want to make ourselves ridiculous," Mr. Gilly said very seriously.

And even though Mrs. Gilly knew that he was thinking of her and her oily young friend, she didn't mind because Mr. Gilly always kept his word. Besides, he was kissing her for the first time in months.

It was at this point the trouble really began. When Mrs. Gilly called the agency the next afternoon and told them she would no longer need the services of Mr. Powers, she expected to receive a bill and mark a period to the entire affair.

But Anthony Powers was, it seemed, unwilling to give up so easily. He came to see her just before tea that afternoon and made quite an exhibition of himself.

He began by saying that Mrs. Gilly must promise him not to tell the agency he had come because they would fire him immediately if they knew he had forced himself on her when his company was no longer wanted. At this point his voice broke. He was a fool, he went on to say, to have allowed himself to have become personally involved with someone when he knew that this was all simply a business arrangement. But he *had* become involved. He loved her. That was it, pure and simple. He had fallen in love with her.

He actually fell to his knees there in the middle of the neat living room, but Mrs. Gilly made him get up immediately. She was extremely disturbed. Pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, she kept glancing in the mirror and seeing a dowdy, gray-haired woman who was obviously fifty if she was a day. She began to think that this young man groveling in front of her had gone out of his mind. Either that, or else she had.

Anthony simply would not stop talking; he talked about his wasted life, and Mrs. Gilly was terrified that he was about to break into tears. She got him to sit quietly on the sofa and rang for tea, but even that didn't seem to settle him. He drank two cups and ate three little cakes, and rambled on and on about how he couldn't face life without seeing her every day. Finally he mentioned suicide.

By this time Mrs. Gilly was nearly frantic. She had promised Mr. Gilly she would never see Anthony Powers, or anyone like him, again, and here he was, sitting in her living room. If Mr. Gilly were to come home, he would think she had broken her promise, and perhaps that would make him break his.

Then there was the poor boy opposite her. It was useless to remind him that he was young enough to be her son. And the thought that he might actually take his own life made cold chills run up and down her back.

Mrs. Gilly felt herself to be rather gauche about affairs of the heart. She had never been attractive enough as a girl to have been the center of any degree of subtle wooing, and now she knew herself to be completely lost. Awkwardly, she pretended that she was fond of Anthony, and offered him a brooch, which she hastily took off her dress, as a keepsake.

"Let it remind you of all the happy times we have spent together," she said, wanting to fall through the floor in her embarrassment.

Anthony Powers took the brooch. Although he did not ex-

amine it carefully and thus could not have realized that it was set with real diamonds and a sizable ruby, he seemed much happier after the offer had been made.

After all, he said, he couldn't expect Mrs. Gilly to think of giving up a comfortable home to be with a penniless fellow like himself. Mrs. Gilly replied with some nonsense about the debt which she owed Mr. Gilly. Actually she scarcely knew what she was saying, she was so eager to have the young man gone before her husband returned home. When Mr. Powers finally took his leave, after startling her by grabbing her hand and kissing it in a most impassioned manner, all she could think of was her relief that he had gone in time to avoid a scene. Mr. Gilly had been most definite in his opinion of oily youths who hired their company out to the highest bidder.

Only much later, when she lay sleepless on her bed with Mr. Gilly peacefully snoring beside her, did Mrs. Gilly reflect that the brooch she had given the young man was a very valuable one, and what was more, her husband had given it to her on the occasion of their twentieth wedding anniversary. Never in the past had she lied to Mr. Gilly, but in the wee hours of the morning she decided, if he were to ask her about it, she would tell him it was lost. She had read somewhere that if one must lie, a simple lie was best.

As for the possibility that she might see Anthony Powers again, that thought never entered her mind. But one afternoon about a month later, the young man phoned her. He sounded desperate, and quite incoherent. Out of a feeling of responsibility, she finally agreed to meet him at a little restaurant near Washington Square for lunch.

He was there waiting for her, looking pale and thinner. He told her he had given up his profession because of her. He intended to become an honest man. Finally, because it seemed the obvious question, Mrs. Gilly asked him if he needed money.

She found it difficult to convince him that she wanted him to have a hundred dollars. She was not a cruel woman, and

her heart had been touched to see the way he had gulped his food. She couldn't bear to see him starve, she said, and she wanted to show him in some material way how proud she was of his attempt to make a new life for himself.

Finally he agreed to accept a check on her personal account for a hundred and fifty dollars. At the same time, she tried to make it clear that Mr. Gilly would be most upset if he knew they had picked up the strands of their acquaintance, even for one afternoon. She was able to get away only after listening to the young man's assurances that he would make something of himself that she could be proud of, and that he would, of course, return the money with interest just as soon as he earned it.

Mrs. Gilly next saw Anthony Powers three weeks later, as she and Mr. Gilly were having cocktails at a very plush bar. They happened to come out of the hotel just behind Anthony. He was escorting an older woman who, in the light of what he had told Mrs. Gilly about giving up his "profession," could only have been his mother. He helped her into a taxi in the same obsequious way he had once helped Mrs. Gilly, and he was wearing an obviously new dinner jacket.

That incident should have warned Mrs. Gilly that she had not seen the last of her young friend. Nevertheless, she was alarmed when he turned up at the house one evening. Mr. Gilly was at a meeting at his club that night, but was expected home any minute. She found it necessary to be quite abrupt.

She was very sorry, she told Anthony, but she could not allow him to come to her house again. When he tried to tell her about his bad luck in trying to find respectable work, she was cruel enough to suggest he could always pawn his dinner jacket. When he demanded to know what she meant, she told him about having seen him a few nights before. Just as she had suspected, the older woman had been his mother, or so he said, and he had hired the jacket to impress her.

"Poor Mum would be brokenhearted if she knew I wasn't a success," he said.

He was so frank and open, and obviously still in love with her, that it nearly broke Mrs. Gilly's heart to insist that he not contact her again. When he protested, she simply rang the bell and asked the butler to show him out.

Anthony went, but ten minutes later he called her. He had turned very nasty and was not at all like his old self. He told her she couldn't brush him off that easily, and he threatened to show her husband a photostat of the check she had given him unless she continued to produce funds at certain regular intervals.

Mrs. Gilly went weak at the knees, but she kept her head. At his direction she wrote out another check for one hundred and fifty dollars and put it into an envelope that very evening. She needed time to think; she had to have time to recover from her shock at the young man's duplicity.

During the next few days Mrs. Gilly was particularly conscious of the comfort which surrounded her. From the first waking moment of the morning, when her maid brought her breakfast on a silver tray, until she wrapped herself luxuriously in an expensive robe and brushed her hair in the evening, Mrs. Gilly reflected on her good fortune. After his single lapse, her husband had become as attentive as any woman could wish him to be, and his affection for her now seemed especially precious.

It was obvious, too, that he had never forgotten what he obviously thought of as her near brush with infidelity. One morning he made a special point of telling her that he had heard his best friend, Bill Carter, threaten to kill the next man who demonstrated affection for his wife, who was quite a different sort of person from Mrs. Gilly. Lucy was beautiful and charming, and had always attracted men like bees to honey. Her latest devotee had been a man much younger than himself, and Bill had threatened to shoot him if he found them together again.

Mrs. Gilly knew there was a special meaning behind her

husband's recitation of this dramatic bit of gossip, and she nodded vigorously to show him she understood.

It was then that Mrs. Gilly decided Anthony Powers would be better off dead.

First, she called Bill Carter at his office. With the assurance of an old friend, she suggested that he leave his office early and, together with Lucy, accompany her and Mr. Gilly to a little restaurant near Central Park where they had dined, the four of them, many times in the past on special occasions.

"And make it a surprise for Lucy," she urged. "Women of our age don't have much to surprise us, you know. She'll enjoy herself more if you just pop home early from the office and tell her where we're going."

After that, Mrs. Gilly called her husband. He was surprised at the suggestion, but agreeable, and told her she was very thoughtful to have devised something of that sort just when Bill and Lucy needed the attention of their friends most.

Then Mrs. Gilly had only one more phone call to make. The man at the agency was pleased to hear from an old customer, and he promised to make certain her orders were followed exactly.

Mrs. Gilly spent the rest of the day trying to read. By the time her husband arrived home, however, she was in such a nervous state it was no trouble at all for her to portray shocked disbelief when he told her about the tragedy that had occurred at the Carter apartment that afternoon when Bill had arrived home early from work.

The entire story was in the late editions. Mrs. Gilly had called Lucy Carter at once, of course, to express her sympathy and ask her to come to them during the next grueling weeks, but Lucy had gone to some hideaway in the country to avoid the newspapermen.

The next months were difficult for both Lucy and Bill. No one realized that better than Mrs. Gilly. But Bill was able to afford a very clever lawyer, who managed to convince

a jury that the adulterous threat of Anthony Powers had given his client the perfect right to shoot him in the head.

After it was all over, Mr. and Mrs. Gilly and Bill and Lucy Carter took a little trip together to Bermuda. Lucy was troublesome at first. She insisted on wondering over and over again why the young man had come to her apartment in the first place. But Mrs. Gilly finally convinced her friend that the least said, soonest mended.

THIS DAY'S EVIL

Jonathan Craig

IT HAD BEEN a near thing. It had been so near that even now, as he crouched there in the bushes behind the small frame house of the man he had come to kill, there was still a taut queasiness in his stomach, and the sweat that laved his ribs was chill.

Half an hour ago, he had been five minutes away from murder. He had stood at the back door of the house, one hand on the heavy automatic in his pocket, the other raised to knock. Then, through the barred but open window, he had heard the hollow pound of heavy boots across the front porch, the hammering of a big man's fist on the door, and the lazy rise and fall of Sheriff Fred Stratton's singsong voice calling out a greeting to the man inside.

"Charlie!" Stratton had said in that fond, bantering tone he always used with Charlie Tate. "Charlie, you no-good rascal, your time has come. Open the door before I break it down."

He hadn't heard Charlie's reply. He had already been running toward the bushes in the backyard, his knees rubbery and his stomach knotting spasmodically with the realization that if the sheriff had come five minutes later he would have caught him in the house with a dead man.

Now, hidden from the house by the bushes, his fear-sharpened senses acutely aware of the incessant drone of insects and the sickening sweetness of lilacs, Earl Munger shifted his weight very slowly and carefully, trying to still the tremor in his legs.

To have been caught in the act by that lazy, fat slob of a sheriff would have been just his luck, he reflected. Sheriff Fred Stratton was the laziest, slowest man in the county,

with a maddening, syrupy drawl that made you want to jam your hand down his throat and pull the words out for him.

They made a good pair, Fred Stratton and Charlie Tate. Stratton had lots of fat, and Tate had lots of money. Not that Tate would have the money long; just as soon as the sheriff left, Tate would have neither the money nor his life.

There were sure some strange ducks in this world, Earl thought sourly. Take Charlie, now. Here he was, seventy if he was a day, with nobody knew how much money hidden in his house, and living like a pauper. He didn't trust anybody or anything, unless maybe it was the sheriff, and he especially didn't trust banks. If all the cash money he'd collected in rent from the property he owned all over the county was in the house, as it almost had to be, there'd be something pretty close to fifty thousand dollars. Charlie never spent a dime. He was a crazy old miser, with bars and bolts on every door and window, just like in the story books, and for all the good his money did him, he might just as well be dead.

And he would be, Earl promised himself again. The money might not do any good for Charlie, but it would sure do a lot of good for him. At twenty-three, he owned the clothes he had on, and another outfit just like them, and nothing more. But after today things would be different. There'd be no more conversations like that one night before last with Lois Kimble, when he'd asked her to go for a drive with him.

"A drive?" Lois had said, the perfect doll's face as innocent as a child's. "A drive in *what,* Earl?"

"The truck," he had said. "It's more comfortable than it looks."

"You mean that old thing you haul fertilizer around in all day?"

"It doesn't smell," he said. "If it did, I wouldn't ask you."

"I'll bet."

"It doesn't. And it rides real good, Lois. You'd be surprised."

She looked at him for a long moment, the wide gray eyes inscrutable. "I'd be ashamed," she said. "I really would, Earl."

"You figure you're too good to ride in a truck? Is that it?"

She started to turn away. "I meant I'd be ashamed if I were you," she said. "I'd be ashamed to ask a girl to . . . Oh, it doesn't matter anyhow. I've got to be going, Earl."

"Sure, it matters. Listen—"

"Not to me," she said, walking away from him. "Goodbye, Earl."

And an hour later he had seen her pass the feed store where he worked, beautiful in her thin summer dress, wide gray eyes fixed attentively on the well-dressed young man beside her, the low-slung red sports car growling arrogantly through the town as if it were affronted by the big unwashed sedans at the curbs, impatient to be back with its own kind in the city where the bright lights and the life and the pleasure were, where there were places that charged more for a dinner than Earl made in a week.

But after today, all that would be changed. He'd have to wait a cautious time, of course, and then he could leave the stink of the feed store and the town far behind, and the young man in the sharp clothes and the red sports car with the beautiful girl on the seat beside him would be none other than Earl Munger.

This afternoon, he had rushed his deliveries so that he would have a full hour to kill and rob Charlie Tate before his boss at the feed store would begin to wonder where he was. He had hidden the small panel truck in the woods back of Charlie's place and then approached the house by a zigzag course through brush and trees, certain that no one had seen him, and that he could return to the truck the same way.

He wondered now why he hadn't robbed Charlie before, why he'd waited so long. And yet, with another part of his mind, he knew why. To rob Charlie, it would be necessary to kill him. The only way to get into his house was to have Charlie unlock the door, and Charlie couldn't be left alive to tell what had happened.

Then he heard the muffled slam of Charlie's front door, and a few moments later the sudden cough and roar of a car engine on the street out in front, and he knew that Sheriff Stratton had left.

Now! Earl thought as he left the bushes and moved swiftly to the back door. I can still do it and be back at the store before anybody starts getting his suspicions up. Once again he closed one hand over the automatic in his pocket and raised the other to knock.

Charlie Tate's footsteps shuffled slowly across the floor, and a moment later his seamed, rheumy-eyed face peered out at Earl through the barred opening in the upper half of the door.

"Hello, Earl," he said. "What is it?"

"The boss asked me to bring you something, Mr. Tate," Earl said, glancing down as if at something beyond Charlie's angle of vision.

"That so?" Charlie said. "What?"

"I don't know," Earl said. "It's wrapped up."

"I didn't order anything," Charlie said.

"It's too big to stick through those bars, Mr. Tate," Earl said. "If you'll open the door, I'll just shove it inside."

Charlie's eyes studied Earl unblinkingly for a full ten seconds; then there was a grating sound from inside, and the door opened slowly, and not very far.

But it was far enough. Earl put his hip against it, forced it back another foot, and slipped inside, the gun out of his pocket now and held up high enough for Charlie to see it at once.

There was surprise on Charlie's face, but no fear. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"I'm taking your money," Earl said. "Wherever it is, get it, and get it now."

Charlie took a slow step backward. "Don't be a fool, son," he said.

"Don't you," Earl said. "It's your money or your life, Charlie. Which'll it be?"

"Son, I—"

Earl raised the gun a little higher. "Get it," he said softly. "You understand me, Charlie? I'm not asking you again."

Charlie hesitated for a moment, then turned and moved on uncertain feet to the dining-room table. "It's in there," he said, his breathy, old-man's voice almost inaudible. There was a bottle of whiskey on the table, but no glasses.

"In the table?" Earl said. "I'm telling you, Charlie. Don't try to pull—"

"Under the extra leaves," Charlie said. "But listen, son—"

"Shut up," Earl said, lifting one of the two extra leaves from the middle of the table. "I'll be damned."

There were two flat steel document cases wedged into the shallow opening formed by the framework beneath the leaves.

Earl pulled the other leaf away and nodded to Charlie. "Open them," he said.

"You can still change your mind," Charlie said. "You can walk out of here right now, and I'll never say any—"

"Open them, I said!"

Charlie sighed heavily, fumbled two small keys from his pocket, and opened the document cases.

It was there, all right, all in neat, banded packages of 20's and 50's, each of the packages a little over two inches thick.

The size of his haul stunned him, and it was several seconds before he could take his eyes from it. Then he remembered what else had to be done and he looked questioningly at the wall just over Charlie Tate's left shoulder.

"What's that?" he asked. "What've you got *there,* Charlie?"

His face puzzled, Charlie turned to look. "What are you talking . . . ?" he began, and then broke off with an explosive gasp as the butt of Earl's automatic, with the full strength of Earl's muscular arm and shoulder behind it, crashed against his skull just two inches behind his right ear.

He fell to the floor without a sound, all of a piece, the way a bag of old clothes held at arm's length would fall, in a limp heap.

Earl knelt down beside him, raising the gun again. Then he lowered it and shoved it back into his pocket. Nobody would ever have to hit Charlie Tate again.

He started to rise, then sank back, the sudden nervous tightening of the muscles across his stomach so painful that he winced. It was all he could do to drag himself to the table. He uncapped the bottle of whiskey and raised it to his lips, shaking so badly that a little of the liquor sloshed out onto the table. It was a big drink, and it seemed to help almost at once. He took another one, just as big, and put the bottle back down on the table.

It was then that he heard the car door slam shut out front, and saw, above the sill of the front window, the dome light and roof-mounted antenna of Sheriff Fred Stratton's cruiser.

A moment before, Earl Munger would have sworn he could not move at all, but he would have been wrong. He moved too quickly to think, too quickly to feel. It took him less than five seconds to close the document cases and shove them under his arm, and it took him even less time than that to reach the back door and close it soundlessly behind him. Returning to the truck by the roundabout route that would prevent his being seen took the better part of ten minutes, every second of it a desperate fight against an almost overpowering urge simply to cut and run.

He'd left the truck on an incline, so that he would be able to get it under way again without using the starter.

Now he pushed the shift lever into the slot for second gear, shoved in the clutch, released the hand brake, waited until the truck had rolled almost to the bottom of the incline, and then let the clutch out. The engine caught, stuttered, died, then caught again, and he drove away as slowly, and therefore as quietly, as he could without stalling the engine again.

Half a mile farther on, he turned off onto a rutted side road that led to a small but deep lake known locally as Hobbs Pond. There he shoved the gun and the packages of money into a half-empty feed sack, making sure they were well covered with feed, and then sent the metal document cases arcing as far toward the center of the lake as he could throw them.

Then, after burying the bag under half a dozen other bags of feed and fertilizer in the truck, he started back toward the store. The money would probably be safe in the truck for as long as he wanted to leave it there, but there was no sense in taking any chances. Tonight or tomorrow he would bury it somewhere, and then leave it there until the day when he could pick a fight with his boss, quit his job, and leave the area for good without raising any questions.

Back at the store, Burt Hornbeck came out on the front loading platform and eyed him narrowly.

"Didn't I see you gassing up that truck at Gurney's this morning?" he asked.

"That's right," Earl said.

"Well, how come? You ever know Gurney to buy anything from the store?"

"No."

"You bet 'no.' What Gurney buys, he buys at Ortman's. Next time, gas it up at Cooper's, like I told you. Coop buys here, and so I buy from Coop. Got it?"

"The tires needed air," Earl said. "Coop hasn't got any air hose."

"Never mind the air hose. After this, gas that truck up at Coop's. I'm beginning to wonder how many times I got to tell you."

Not too many times, Earl thought as he walked back to the washroom to throw cold water on his face. Another couple or three weeks, a month at the most, and he'd be buying gas for a sassy red sports car, not a battered old delivery truck.

The whiskey had begun to churn in his stomach a little. But it would be all right, he knew. From now on, everything would be all right. For a man with thousands of dollars everything had to be. That was the way of the world.

When he came back out to the loading platform, Sheriff Stratton's car was there, and the sheriff was talking with a fair-sized knot of men. The sheriff was sitting on the old kitchen chair Hornbeck kept out on the platform, his enormous bulk dwarfing it, making it seem like something from a child's playroom.

Trust the fat slob not to stand up when he can sit down, Earl thought as he edged a bit closer. The laziest man in the country, if not in the state. If Stratton was on one side of the street and wanted to get to the other, he would climb in his car, drive to the corner, make a U-turn, and come back, all to save walking a lousy forty feet. And talk about fat. The county could save money by buying a tub of lard and nailing a star on it. They'd have just as good a sheriff, and it wouldn't cost them a fraction of what they had to pay Stratton.

"What happened?" Earl asked George Dill, who had wandered over from his grocery store.

"It's old Charlie Tate," George said. "He's done took poison."

"He *what?*" Earl said.

"Poison," George said. "He killed himself."

The sheriff glanced up at Earl and nodded. "Howdy, Earl," he said, making about six syllables out of it. "Yes,

that's what he did, all right. Lord only knows why, but he did." Beneath his immaculate white Stetson, the sheriff's round, pink-skinned face was troubled, and the small, almost effeminate hands drummed nervously on his knees.

"He—poisoned himself?" Earl said.

"I always said he was crazy, and now I know it," Norm Hightower, who owned the creamery, said. "He'd have to be."

There were a dozen questions Earl wanted to ask, but he could ask none of them. He wet his lips and waited.

The sheriff took a small ivory-colored envelope from the breast pocket of his shirt, looked at it, shook his head wonderingly, and slipped it back into his pocket.

"Charlie gave me that about half an hour before I found him dead," he said. "He told me not to open it until after supper. But there was something about the way he said it that bothered me. He tried to make it sound like maybe he was playing a little joke on somebody, maybe me. But he didn't bring it off. I had this feeling, and so as soon as I got around the corner I stopped the car and read it."

"And it said he was going to kill himself?" Joe Kirk, who carried the Rural Route One, said.

"That's what it said, all right," the sheriff said.

"But he didn't say why?" Frank Dorn, the barber, asked.

"No," Stratton said. "All he said was, he was going to do it, and what with." He reached into his righthand trouser pocket and drew out a small blue and yellow tin about the size of a package of cigarettes. "And that's another thing I can't understand, boys. It's bad enough he would want to kill himself. But why would he do it with a thing like this?"

"What is it?" Sam Collins, from the lumber yard, asked.

"Trioxide of arsenic," the sheriff said, putting the tin back in his pocket. "I found it on the floor beneath the table."

"How's that again, Sheriff?" Sam Collins asked.

"Ratsbane, Sam," Stratton said. "Arsenic. I reckon there

isn't a more horrible death in this world than that. It must be the worst agony there is."

"Why'd he want to take such a thing, then?" Jim Ryerson, the mechanic from Meckle's Garage, asked.

"It's like I told you," Norm Hightower said. "He was crazy. I always said so, and now I know it."

The sheriff got to his feet, ponderously, looking at the now badly sprung kitchen chair regretfully, as if he hated to leave it. "Well," he drawled in that slow, slow singsong of his, "I reckon maybe I'd better call the coroner and the others. At least Charlie didn't have any kin. It seems like kinfolks just can't stand the idea of somebody killing himself. They always carry on something fierce. I've even had them try to get me to make out they died a natural death or got killed somehow. Anything but suicide. They can't stand it at all."

"I fed arsenic to some rats once," Tom Martin, the druggist, said. "I'd never do it again. When I saw what it did to those rats, I . . . well, I'd never do it again. Even rats don't deserve to die like that. It was the most awful thing I ever saw."

"Like I said before," the sheriff said. "I just can't understand old Charlie killing himself that way."

"Maybe he didn't know exactly what it would do to him," Tom Martin said.

"Maybe not," the sheriff said. "I don't see how he could know, and still take half a box of ratsbane and dump it in a bottle of whiskey and drain almost half of it. There must have been enough arsenic in that bottle to kill everybody here and half the other folks in town besides." He moved off slowly in the direction of his car, picking his way carefully, as if to complete the short trip in the fewest steps possible. "I'd better be seeing about those phone calls," he said. "There's always a big to-do with a thing like this. Of course, Charlie's not having any kin is a help, but there'll still be a lot of work."

On the loading platform, Earl Munger tried to fight back

the mounting terror inside him. No wonder the sheriff had taken one look at Charlie Tate lying there on the floor and thought he had died of poison. Why should he have looked for wounds or anything else? And how long would it be, Earl wondered, before the ratsbane really did to him what the sheriff had thought it had done to Charlie Tate? It was already killing him, he knew; he would feel the first horrible clutch of agony at any moment.

He forced himself to walk with reasonable steadiness to the truck, and although the door felt as heavy as the door of a bank vault, he managed to open it somehow and get in and drive away slowly.

Once on the highway that led to Belleville, he mashed the gas pedal to the floorboard and kept it there. He had to get to a doctor, and, in this forsaken area, doctors were few and very far between. The nearest was Doc Whittaker, four miles this side of Belleville. Whittaker might be a drunk, but he knew his business, at least when he was sober.

But when he reached Whittaker's place, Mrs. Whittaker told him her husband was out on a house call. He half ran back to the truck, already stabbing with the ignition key as he jumped inside, and took off with a scorch of rubber that left Mrs. Whittaker staring after him with amazement.

The next nearest doctor was Courtney Hampton, six miles east of Belleville on Coachman Road.

He was beginning to feel it now, the first stab of pain deep in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't like the other pains, the ones he had felt earlier when he was scared; it wasn't as acute, but it was growing stronger, and it was deep, deep inside him. It was the arsenic, and it was going to kill him.

There was a red light ahead. The Belleville cutoff. He kept the gas pedal on the floor, and when he reached the intersection, he shut his eyes for a moment, waiting for the collision that was almost sure to come. Brakes screamed and tires squealed on both sides of him, but no one crashed into him, and he started down the long straight stretch of highway that would bring him to Coachman Road.

Eighteen minutes later, Earl Munger sat on Doctor Hampton's operating table, a rubber tube in his stomach, while the doctor filled a hypodermic needle, and then, without Earl's feeling it at all, inserted it in the back of his upper arm.

"And so you spread your lunch out right there where the insect spray could get to it," Hampton said, almost with amusement. "And sat there eating sandwiches garnished with arsenic, without even knowing it." He glanced at Earl as if he expected him to say something, tube in his stomach or not. "Well," he went on, "you wouldn't be able to tell, of course. That's the insidious thing about arsenic. There's no smell or taste. That's why it's been a poisoner's favorite all through the ages."

"You want me to come back again, Doc?" Earl asked when Hampton had removed the tube.

"Not unless you feel ill again," Hampton said. "That will be ten dollars, please."

On his way home, Earl Munger, for the first time in his life, knew the meaning of pure elation. It was a strange feeling, one he couldn't quite trust at first; but with every mile the feeling grew, and the happiness that flooded through him was the kind of happiness he had known as a child when things and people were the way they seemed to be, and not, as he had learned all too soon, the way they really were.

He took the long curve above the old Haverman place almost flat out, feeding more gas the farther he went into it, the way he had read that sports-car drivers did. Even the old delivery truck seemed to handle like a sports car, and it amused him to think that, with the way he and the truck felt just now, he could show those fancy Ferrari and Lotus and Porsche drivers a thing or two.

He felt like singing, and he did. He felt like a fool; he felt as if he were drunk, but he sang at the top of his voice, and he was still singing when he braked the truck to a stop in front of the feed store and got out.

He would take the long way home, he decided. It was the better part of two miles that way, but he felt like walking, something he hadn't felt like doing in more years than he could remember.

He began to sing again, walking slowly, enjoying himself to an extent he would once have believed impossible. He sang all the way to his rooming house, and then, just as happily but a bit more quietly, continued to sing as he climbed the stairs to his room on the second floor and opened the door.

Sheriff Fred Stratton sat there in Earl's only chair, the pink moon face as expressionless as so much suet, the small hands lying quietly on the brim of the spotless white Stetson in his lap.

Earl stared at him for a moment, then closed the door and sat down on the side of the bed. "What are you doing here, Sheriff?" he asked.

"We were waiting for you at the store," Stratton said. "My deputy and me."

"I didn't see anybody," Earl said. "Why would you be wait—?"

"We didn't mean for you to see us," Stratton said. "It didn't take us long to find that money, Earl. And the gun, too, of course."

"Money?" Earl said. "What money? I don't know anything about any money. Or any gun, either."

Stratton reached up and took the small, ivory-colored envelope from the breast pocket of his shirt. "Letter from my youngest daughter," he said. "Looks like she's bound and determined to make me a proud granddaddy again."

"That's the same letter you told everybody Charlie Tate gave you just before he—" Earl began, then broke off abruptly.

"That's right," Stratton said, putting the envelope back in his pocket and taking out the small blue and yellow tin. "Just like I told them this little box of throat lozenges was ratsbane."

Earl felt his mouth go dry. "Not poison?" he heard himself say. "Not arsenic?"

"No," Stratton said. "And even if Charlie *had* been meaning to poison himself, he wouldn't have put the poison in a bottle of whiskey. He never took a drink in his life. That bottle on the table was mine, son. Charlie always kept a bottle on hand for me, because he knew I was a man that liked a little nip now and then."

Stratton glanced down at the tin. "I dropped this at Charlie's house when I was there the first time, and so I went back to get it. When I saw what had happened, and that Charlie had opened his back door to somebody, I knew the killer had to be a man he knew pretty well. Otherwise, Charlie would never have let him in the house."

"But why?" Earl said. "Why did you . . . ?"

"Why'd I make up all that about the letter and the lozenges?" Stratton said. "Well, I got the idea when I noticed the killer had helped himself to the whiskey. I'd had a drink myself, the first time I was there, and I could see that somebody had taken it down another couple of inches, not to mention spilling some on the table. I figured the killing must have rawed somebody's nerves so much he'd had to take a couple of strong jolts to straighten himself out."

Stratton paused, studying Earl with tired, sleepy eyes that told him nothing at all. Earl waited until he could wait no longer. "And then?" he asked.

"Well," Stratton said, "there's one sure thing in this world, son. A man that thinks he's been poisoned is going to get himself to a doctor, and get there fast. And since there're only four doctors within thirty miles of here, all I had to do was call them and ask them to let me know who showed up."

"But I had the symptoms," Earl said. "I was in pain, and I—"

"Sometimes if a man *thinks* a thing is so, then it *is* so," Stratton said. "You were dead certain you'd been poisoned,

and so naturally you had the symptoms." He got to his feet, put the big white hat on his head very carefully, and gestured toward the door. "Well, Earl, I reckon we'd better head over toward the jail."

"A trap," Earl said bitterly. "A dirty, lousy trap. I guess you figure you're pretty smart, don't you?"

Stratton looked surprised. "No such thing," he said. "Just pretty lazy. I saw a chance to make your guilty conscience do my work for me, and I took it. That's how it is with us lazy folks, son. If there's a way to save ourselves some work, we'll find it."

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Diane Frazer

HENRY DUVERNOIS, president of the Merchants Bank, was standing at the window of his office, which overlooked the busy Boulevard Haussman. He was thinking morosely of the letter which that morning's mail had brought to his desk for just one reason—to spoil what had promised to be a perfect day.

He looked again at the letter in his hand, read it over and sighed. It was very, very annoying, mainly because something had to be done about it, and right away, which meant that he wouldn't be able to take his aperitif as usual at Fouquet's.

The envelope in which the letter had arrived was marked, he noted wrathfully, "PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL: FOR M. DUVERNOIS PERSONALLY," which, of course, was the reason that he was now personally bothered with this distressing matter. He went back to his desk and buzzed his secretary to come in.

Mlle. Arlette entered, the radiant morning smile firmly entrenched on her lovely face. "Yes, monsieur," she said throatily. "You want me, sir?"

He thought it over for a moment. If the occasion weren't so earnest, demanding his undivided attention, he might have responded jovially and perhaps even equivocally. Henry Duvernois was a democratic man and Mlle. Arlette the prettiest secretary he had had in years. But this was no time for frivolities. "How did this get to my desk?" he asked, pointing with disgust to the envelope which lay there.

Mlle. Arlette came a step nearer to inspect the object in question at closer range. She uses Miss Dior, he thought

automatically. I wonder how she can afford it. Probably takes it out of petty cash. You can't trust anyone any more.

Mlle. Arlette finished her inspection. "This, monsieur?" she asked, modestly stepping back again. "Why, it came in the morning mail and, as it was marked private and confidential, I thought . . ."

"You are my private and confidential secretary," he reminded her. "Are you not? Why do I have to be bothered with every detail?"

"But you told me only last week, monsieur, that private letters addressed to you should not be opened by me," she said, hurt. "I was merely following your instructions."

She knew, of course, what kind of private letters he had meant. You could smell them a mile. The letter on M. Duvernois' desk was obviously not one of "those" letters. "Tell M. Bourdely to come in," he ordered. "That is, if he has arrived by now. We are keeping strange working hours around here."

"M. Bourdely is in his office," she said stiffly. "I'll tell him you wish to see him."

"I would appreciate that very much indeed," he said sarcastically and Mlle. Arlette left in a huff. Duvernois looked at his watch. Already eleven o'clock. He wouldn't make it for aperitifs and it was such a beautiful day. The Champs Elysées at noon hour would be filled with pretty women.

"You wanted to see me?" Edmonde Bourdely, treasurer of the Merchants Bank, had come in, silently, as was his irritating habit.

"Yes, Edmonde, something extremely annoying has come up. Look at this." He pushed the envelope over to Bourdely, who extracted the letter and began to read. "No signature," he said, when he had finished. "Anonymous. I wouldn't pay any attention to this kind of thing."

"You wouldn't, eh?" Duvernois said. "Just ignore the whole business. And let this man go on robbing us?"

"You don't seriously think these accusations are true?

Why, this letter is unsigned. Why didn't whoever wrote it come out in the open if he is convinced that what he writes is true?"

"People down there are pretty careful," Duvernois said. "They don't want involvement if they can help. Why should they? For all we know, the man he accuses of pilfering might be influential. The mayor might be his brother, or the *sous-préfet* his cousin. You never know. Or the writer is an employe of the bank and prefers to remain anonymous, not knowing what action we will take."

"You really believe there's some truth in this, sir?"

Duvernois shrugged. "Might be. Why would someone make such an accusation if it isn't the truth?"

"You know this Lachetez, the so-called embezzler?"

"Vaguely, Nîmes is a key post, in a way. Not one of our bigger branches but an important one. The wine and olive growers of the region are valued customers. The olive trees yield only every other year. They need credit and we gladly extend it. We do quite some business down there."

"And this Lachetez?"

"Used to be chief cashier. He was made provisory manager when Deletraz died three years ago."

"Three years ago. You mean he's been acting as manager for three years and hasn't been formally assigned this post?"

"There were circumstances." Dubernois looked annoyed. "It's really a plum; not too much work, not too much responsibility. Yet a fairly high-rated position. I've meant to send someone from Paris down there but I haven't got around to it."

"In the meantime, this Lachetez works as manager for a cashier's pay."

"As I said, it was a temporary arrangement. He's written me a few letters over the years, that's why I remember his name. He's stressed, rather immodestly, I'd say, what excellent work he's done and that he feels entitled to a manager's status. I meant to work something out, but you know how it is. I've more important things to attend to."

"So he lost his patience and began dipping into the till. That's what our anonymous writer claims. He speaks of large sums. How would it be possible? Audits every quarter; nothing irregular has come to my attention."

"You don't know the situation down there," Duvernois said impatiently. "Our auditors needn't find a thing. The books are probably in perfect order. To find out if there's foul play, we'd have to check loans and see if those who were presumably the recipient of same actually received them. All Lachetez has to do, if he's dishonest, is to enter fictitious loans in the books. It would take some time before our people could ascertain whether or not the money went to the farmers or into Lachetez' pockets."

"If you're really suspicious we'll have to send someone down to make a thorough check; contact all the loan holders."

"As simple as that?" Duvernois sneered. "Ask people if they actually received a loan from us, or does our manager just pretend they did. Oh, that would do wonders for our reputation!"

"Then what else? I don't see—"

"Oh, you don't. Let me inform you that the Merchants Bank not only loans money, it also receives money from depositors. Let me tell you also that the people down there are the most distrustful in all of France. It's taken us years to convince them that their money is safer with us than under their mattresses. If they thought there was something fishy, they'd see their worst fears confirmed and, before you know it, they would yank out all the money they've deposited with us."

"We could discreetly question Lachetez?"

"Would you mind telling me how? Ask him in all confidence to be good enough to tell us whether or not he has embezzled money? You don't know this region. Nothing there can be done discreetly. Even if we send a couple of accountants to recheck the books, the bank employes would know right away that something was up. In a matter

of hours it would be all over town. And there's Lachetez, of course. This requires tact."

"What about him?"

"Well, he's innocent until proven guilty. After all, he's worked for us for more than twenty years. I can't gamble on hurting or embarrassing him. In a relatively small city like Nîmes even a shadow of suspicion could damage him irrevocably."

"What else can be done, then?"

"I thought you might have a suggestion. That's why I asked you to come in. After all, I have so many important things to attend to." He looked furtively at his watch—11:45. He might still make it for aperitifs at Fouquet's.

"The only suggestion I can offer is to send accountants down. Not make it a surprise check, but inform Lachetez that we're making these checks all over the country."

"The last audit took place only two months ago and ostensibly everything was in order. But if you can't come up with anything better, then I suppose . . . write a letter to Lachetez, a nice letter, please, and give some excuse for this unusual procedure."

"I'll do that," Bourdely said. "Personally I don't believe there's anything to it. I never trust anonymous letters."

"I hope you're right. Please excuse me now. I have an important engagement."

A week later there was nothing to report. "Absolutely nothing," Edmonde Bourdely declared. No unusual loans granted; as a matter of fact, far less than at the same time last year. Lachetez, according to everything said about him, was a very busy and dedicated man.

Duvernois listened with obvious relief. Did they say how Lachetez took it, he wanted to know. "They tell me he wasn't fooled," Bourdely admitted. "Indeed, he seemed to be quite upset . . . even offered to resign."

"Resign?"

"He said we obviously didn't trust him, and maybe it would be better to send someone from Paris to take over his duties, which he claimed were strenuous and . . . unrewarding."

"But he *didn't* resign?"

"No, but I guess he's thinking about it." Bourdely looked a little uncomfortable.

"This is what I might have expected," Duvernois said. "Here he is one of our oldest employes . . . we'll have to do something. Everything seems to be in order and we have nothing to worry about except Lachetez. Write him a conciliatory letter. He'll calm down, you'll see."

Henry Duvernois stared at the letter in his hand. It looked the same as the other one and the envelope once more was marked "PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL." Again Mlle. Arlette had put it on his desk unopened. He threw the switch on the intercom. "Ask Bourdely to see me immediately," he bellowed.

When the treasurer came into his office, Duvernois shoved the letter across the desk. "You and your suggestions," he spat. "This scoundrel Lachetez has had you . . . you and your accountants. All he had to do when he got your letter was to take the embezzled money from wherever he had it hidden and put it back in the safe, make a few corrections in the books. He probably has two sets of books anyway! We made it easy for him."

"May I remind you that it was your idea to inform Lachetez of our proposed audit, sir? You even told me to make it a 'nice' letter. Well, what are we going to do now?"

"Have you seen what our anonymous correspondent threatens to do? Write poison letters to our depositors, informing them that their money is going down the drain. You know what that could mean?"

"How old is Lachetez?" Bourdely asked.

"How old? What in creation has that to do . . . fifty . . . fifty-five. How am I supposed to know?"

"I see you haven't read this letter carefully. It says something about Lachetez and a young girl."

"I was upset," Duvernois defended himself. "Let me see. Why of course, that's the perfect reason . . . the old, old story. We'll have to act, and quickly."

"Send our men down there again?"

"No, we'll go, you and I. It's too important to leave to others."

"But—"

"I tell you we'll go. Our whole business in the Southwest depends on our acting quickly and efficiently. This time we won't give Lachetez warning. We'll take a plane and be there in three hours."

They arrived at Nîmes, via a rented car from Marseilles, in good time. At the bank they asked for the manager. "M. Lachetez isn't here," the assistant cashier told them.

"Not here? What do you mean, not here? Where is he, then?"

"He left for a short trip. Just a while ago. A young lady came for him and they both left. He explained that he had some business to do and would be back tomorrow."

"A young lady . . . a short trip. Who was the young lady, and where did they go?"

"I don't know, monsieur." The cashier looked puzzled. "Is there something I can do?"

"What trains are leaving?" Duvernois asked, grabbing hold of the man's lapel. "We *must* speak to Lachetez before he leaves."

"He might have got a train already," Bourdely said.

"No, there would be no train after the ten o'clock until the Catalan for Geneva. Probably M. Lachetez is taking that. It is due in about seven minutes."

"The Catalan . . . Geneva . . . that's it," Duvernois said, releasing the man. "The station, Bourdely. Get a cab."

The cashier gestured. "I don't think you could possibly make it. The station is too far away."

"Give me the phone," Duvernois said hoarsely. "Quick! Give me the phone."

"But I don't understand," Auguste Lachetez said with tears in his eyes. "I do not understand at all. The gendarmerie at the station, and all those people staring at me."

"I'm afraid it was necessary, Lachetez," Duvernois said shortly. "Who is this young lady, sir?"

"My daughter, Eloise. She was raised by my sister in Arles, since my wife passed away. I was going to take her to Geneva to a boarding school. Now I have missed the train. Monsieur, please tell me: why was I prevented from taking the train and brought back here?"

Duvernois' jaw fell. "Your *daughter?*"

"Yes . . . say *'bon jour'* to M. Duvernois, Eloise."

"And you were taking her to a boarding school?"

"Yes, there is a fine one, managed by the sisters. It's an excellent school and not too expensive for a man who is not rich. I had intended to take the night train back."

Duvernois looked at Bourdely, who looked quickly away. "I regret very much," Duvernois said with a sense of growing uncertainty. "We would like, that is, M. Bourdely would like to look at the books. He might as well, now that we're here, and I'll explain later. I assure you that I'll explain everything. Bourdely?"

"The books? Again?" Lachetez' face went stony. "But of course, monsieur, the books."

"Since we're here," Duvernois said uneasily.

"I don't know what to say, Lachetez," Duvernois muttered miserably. They were in his hotel room at the Cheval Blanc. Lachetez was seated in a leather chair, a broken man.

"I am finished," he said, bowing his head. "I might as well go to America. Arrested at the train station by gendarmes, taken forcibly back to the bank, with my young daughter. It is too terrible!"

"I know, I know. This is a nightmare. M. Bourdely says that your management appears to be in excellent shape. In excellent . . ."

"Of course, monsieur. I have been working in your bank for twenty-three years. And you thought something was wrong. That's why you had examiners here only a short while ago, and now you come personally. Why, monsieur? Why?"

"I can't explain, Lachetez, not right now. I will later. But I sincerely hope that you will allow me to compensate for your . . . unh, inconvenience."

"Inconvenience, M. Duvernois? That is indeed a mild word. I, Auguste Lachetez, arrested at the station like a criminal! Of course, it is all over town by now that I've done something frightful. No, monsieur, I will have to leave the city; the country."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Lachetez," Duvernois said sternly. "Nobody around here will think ill of you, believe me. After all, I don't make a promotion—manager of the Nîmes Branch of the Merchants Trust—unless that someone is absolutely and irrevocably of the first quality."

"Manager . . ." Lachetez stammered, somewhat lost for words.

"Yes, manager, of course. You should have had the designation long ago. And the salary. Never too late, eh, Lachetez?"

"I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing. Just enjoy it. We will let everyone know immediately. That will quiet any rumors. I think you need a vacation. I'm sure someone here can take your place for a week. You come to Paris with us as our guest. You and your lovely daughter. Yes, that's what we'll do. It fits in, too. We will let it be known that you weren't arrested, of course. I had to prevent your leaving for Geneva because we needed you in Paris for an important conference. The new manager of the Nîmes Branch was asked to attend board meetings. How does it sound, Lachetez? You show your daugh-

ter around and then you can take her to Geneva from Paris, at the end of the week. It's only an hour by plane."

M. Lachetez' color began to return. "It sounds wonderful, M. Duvernois," he said gratefully. "Did you hear that, Eloise? We are going to Paris! Notre Dame, the Louvre . . . and I, to be the new manager of the Merchants Bank in Nîmes. I don't know what to say!"

"Say nothing," Duvernois repeated. "You deserve it," he added expansively. "Indeed you do."

"How do you like Paris, Uncle Auguste?" Arlette asked. They were having dinner at her tiny apartment in Neuilly.

"It's astounding," Lachetez said, hungrily eating his *oeufs tapenade*. "A miraculous city. And Arlette, my dear, how can I ever thank you for all you have done?"

"It was nothing. A pleasure, dear Uncle. We were all outraged that you were shown no recognition, after three years! But it was your plan, after all. What a clever man you are, Uncle Auguste."

Lachetez beamed. "I think, too, it was an ingenious scheme," he agreed complacently. "I wasn't too sure about the first letter, but I knew the second one would bring real results. I didn't know exactly what, but I felt fairly safe, knowing that you would get word to me what Duvernois meant to do about it."

"It was easy," Arlette crowed. "It was I who had to make their plane reservations to Marseilles, and he told me, without my having to ask, that he would be doing business in Nîmes. It was almost too simple, Uncle."

"As soon as I got your call I had Pepe check the plane at Marseilles and he saw them renting the car. It was child's play from then on. I had Eloise pack the suitcase and fortunately it worked out perfectly, with the Catalan leaving around that time. It was even better that they didn't have a chance to go to the station themselves. Having them call out the gendarmerie made it so much more dramatic."

"Have some more sauce," Arlette said. "You too, Eloise. I'm a good cook, yes?"

"Magnificent, *chérie*. Say, isn't this a funny life? I wrote letters and letters telling him what an honest and efficient man I am and I didn't even have an answer to any of them. But when I finally told him I was a scoundrel and a thief, he made me a manager."

"To your health, Uncle," Mlle. Arlette said, raising her glass of vin rosé. *"À votre bonne santé."*

NEVER COME BACK

Robert Colby

JERRY HOAGLAND braked the cab at the intersection of Sunset and Beverly Glen just after ten o'clock on a Thursday night in August. There was little action on the radio and all the best cab stands around Beverly Hills and West L.A. were loaded to capacity.

Jerry made a quick decision. He turned off Sunset and wheeled the cab through the east gate to Bel-Air, then made a U-turn and parked on the shadowy apron across the street from the patrol hut.

The stands were identified by number. This one was designated stand "twenty-seven," but was called over the radio as "two-seven." On a hot day it was a cool, pleasant place to await an order, and business was brisk. At night it was dark and remote and lonely, the calls infrequent. Consequently, after sunset, it was seldom occupied.

Tonight Jerry was grateful to find a spot anywhere. He pushed the yellow hat back off his head, slouched in the seat and, with half an ear, listened to the spaced monotone of the dispatcher. She had just called a "two-five." That was over in Westwood Village. She sent the driver to pick up a load in front of the Village Theater. It probably wouldn't be much—a short hop, which, in the jargon of the business, was a "jerk."

Jerry yawned, lighted a cigarette. His thoughts drifted listlessly, were carried away on dark tides of despair. At thirty-six, fourteen years removed from college and his first wide-eyed job in the office of an aircraft manufacturing company, he was broke. This, though eight months and a hundred years ago he had been advertising manager for the last of the long string of companies he had exhausted.

Exhausted, also, were the two wives who had divorced him. He had not been able to hold them much longer than his jobs. Gone was a comfortable house with all its furnishings, and a late-model car. Pawned was a three-hundred-dollar watch given to him by his first wife, and a variety of other expensive items acquired over the years.

His personal exhaustion of spirit was total. He was in the last stages of disenchantment, that state of mind which, more than giving up, is too indifferent to care. With his spirit on crutches, he could still drive a cab to oblivion.

By the time he was willing to admit that he should see an analyst, he couldn't afford one. He had to wait his turn at a free clinic. The analyst had told him he should not be ashamed of his gambling habit, even though it had pulled down the whole structure of his life. It was a sickness of the mind and should be treated precisely like any other sickness.

The analyst, stout and slovenly, needed a shave, his ill-fitting suit was rumpled; his teeth, behind thick, moist lips, were tobacco-stained, and he had spoken with a weary, pompous detachment.

"No . . . no, my friend, you do not want to win when you gamble. You only imagine that this is so. It is a form of self-deception. What man could admit, even to himself, that he gambles to lose? The fact remains that you do want to lose, to punish yourself for some hidden guilt which we must find.

"If you *really* wanted to win, my friend, experience would have taught you that to win at gambling over any protracted period of time is a childishly impossible dream. You would then have given it up, along with the pain of losing, which you cherish.

"Can I prove that you are a compulsive loser? Certainly! You made frequent trips to Las Vegas. You were a consistent loser. Then one night you won a large amount of money, six thousand dollars. You decided you would quit and go home with this money, but when you went to your hotel

room, you could not sleep. Some deep anxiety made you toss and turn fitfully.

"In your own words, 'All that money was burning a hole in my pocket.' So you got up and you went back to the tables and you lost, down to the last dollar. Then what did you do? You fell into bed and you slept like a baby! Properly punished, satisfied, guilt suspended, you slept.

"The drinking? Try to control it, but don't worry too much about it. You are not an alcoholic. Drinking is the effect, not the cause of your trouble. You gamble and you lose. Not just money. Wife, home, job—everything. Then you feel sorry for yourself, so you drink, and for a little while you are a grand, misunderstood fellow who is just unlucky, that's all.

"Come back and see me, Hoagland. In time, perhaps I will be able to show you that you lost nothing in your whole life that you did not *want* to lose, and I am not speaking exclusively of money. Gambling, drinking are only the obvious paths to self-destruction. If they did not exist, you would have found another way, believe me."

Jerry had not returned to see the analyst. It was difficult to get an appointment; besides, he was irritated by the analyst's condescension, his cocksure conclusions. Jerry had heard all that stuff before about compulsive losers. The analyst had only stacked one oversimplification on top of another, and you could not argue with him. He knew it all.

He had not listened when Jerry told him that winning, or losing, was incidental. What he did want, what he *had* to have, was the action, the excitement. In a creeping world of unthinkable dullness he was compelled by the risk, the heart-racing jeopardy of putting all that he had on the line.

What did it matter? The whole thing was now ridiculous. The problem was purely academic. At this point in his life he did not need an analyst to tell him that he had nothing to risk and, therefore, nothing to lose. This was the end of the line.

That was the way Mel Wetzler, chubby comic of the West

L.A. garage, had put it one payday to a small audience in front of the cashier's window. "Man," he had needled, "this is the end of the line. You guys really screwed up. This is where they send you when you flunk out. All the goof-ups get from six months to life in this joint.

"The judge wears a yellow robe, whatever you call them things, and a yellow hat, and he says, 'Wetzler, for the crime of failing to make it in the kosher-pickle business and six other equally responsible jobs, I sentence you to be confined for life behind the steering wheel of a yellow cab.'

"Confess, you guys! Where did *you* goof up?"

They had laughed without really laughing and smiled without really smiling, and Jerry had seen the pain in their eyes.

He flipped his cigarette out the window and reached for the brake release. Nothing doing here, time to move on.

At that moment the dispatcher called his stand number. "Two-seven," she said. "Anyone on two-seven?"

Jerry grabbed the microphone and quickly spoke his call letters. You had to be fast. Otherwise some hungry driver cruising about or idling on another stand would try to "guzzle" the order by pretending he was at your location. Then you would have to convince the dispatcher that he was a miserable liar, or race him for the load.

"K-four-six on two-seven," Jerry barked.

"K-four-six," the dispatcher droned, "get the Bel-Air Hotel, in the lobby."

"K-four-six, check!" Jerry said. "What name on that one?"

"No name. See the doorman."

"Check," he answered. Under the dome light he wrote on the trip sheet the time and destination. Then he pulled the headlight switch and swung around, gunning north into the summer darkness shrouding the fabled mansions of Bel-Air, where movie stars, producers, and their satellites, plus the ordinary rich, dwelt in cloistered splendor.

It was a good order, the Bel-Air Hotel, a kind of oasis in

that suburban desert, with no city life for miles. The money-eyed people who stayed there usually had a long way to go. At all hours, a large percentage went to the airport, a six-dollar ride, a dollar or more tip.

Calculating these possible benefits, Jerry was annoyed with himself. How quickly and cheaply he had sold himself out, adjusting the scale of his sights from the twenty-thousand-a-year executive to the shabby target of the cab driver—fifty percent of meter and tips.

Yet there was now, for him, nothing left out there in the wilderness of Big Business, with his reputation bankrupt, no references on credit. Anyway, there were worse jobs, of the sort which required just enough effort to jog you from the comfortable stupor of absolute indifference.

Too, driving a cab had its moments. That sprawling city was a wheel of chance, a wheel of people; all the crazy-laughing-crying-snarling-scheming-groping-doomed, pathetic people. When they spun the wheel and the ball fell into your slot, adventure waited in the night.

Jerry wound and unwound the cab through the twisting, shadowy complex of embowered roads toward the hotel. Great stone mansions, formal as ancient libraries, low-flung, glassy-eyed ranch houses, and drawling colonials peered from behind trees, hedges, gated walls—winked, and were gone.

The hotel loomed up suddenly. Jerry made the turn, rolled to a halt before the entrance. The doorman glanced at the cab, then phoned the desk.

Shortly, a man dressed expensively, impeccably, in a light gray suit, came down the canopied walk from the hotel. He moved deliberately, as if he'd had one too many and was determined to conceal it. Under one arm he carried a bulging portfolio case, clutching it as if it might take wing and fly.

The doorman made a ceremony of opening the cab door and was ignored for his effort. The man bent inside, fell heavily onto the seat. The doorman expressed his contempt by slamming the door mightily.

Jerry turned, waiting woodenly for the address. Although the signals of manner and facial structure had fooled him once or twice before, he still decided instantly that he would not like this man with the icy, impatient eyes, and angry mouth.

"Ninety-eight thirty-three Stone Valley Road," the man said, making it sound like a challenge, leaning forward and waving Jerry on with an imperious gesture. "And, cabby, drive it like a milk wagon, not an ambulance. I don't want a ride to the hospital."

Jerry said nothing. The man was half-stoned, feeling his idiot self-importance; not knowing that he was only a mortal, sinking on the same ship with Jerry to eternity.

Jerry maneuvered the cab to the exit and swung left to begin the climb up Stone Valley Road to ninety-eight thirty-three, a distance of not more than two miles, he estimated; no city, no airport, and probably no tip. The hell with it.

"You're not much of a talker, are you?" the man said, his words biting, though faintly slurred and vaguely softened by overtones of culture. "I thought you cabbies were *big, big* talkers."

"Depends on inclination," said Jerry, adjusting his mirror to view the man's face.

"Inclination, huh?" The man snorted, worked his jaw. "But you're not *inclined* to talk, mmmm?"

"We're not paid to talk," Jerry answered coolly. "Only to drive."

"Well, I wish I had you on *my* staff. I know how to handle smart boys like you. I'd teach you some manners in a hurry!

Jerry braked and pulled in sharply to the curb. As he turned toward the man, he found the dome switch and gave it a twist for light.

"Look," he said, "I don't like you either. I won't be your whipping boy and I won't drool all over you. To me, you're just so many pounds of meat I have to haul at so many cents a mile. You can pay me what's on the meter and then you

stumble on up the hill to beddy-bye, or you can ride with me and keep your mouth shut! Take your choice."

The man gaped in astonishment before his jaws sprang together like a steel trap. "I—I'll report you to the president of your company!" he snarled, aiming a finger. "Tomorrow you'll be walking the streets, looking for a job!"

"Fine, I'll make it easy for you," said Jerry evenly. "I'll give you my name and cab number."

The man leaned forward until they were inches apart, the whisky scent heavy on his breath. "Who do you think you are?" he growled. "Why, you two-bit flunky, I can buy and sell your kind by the carload. Don't give *me* ultimatums. I'd like to see you put me out of this cab!"

Swiftly, Jerry got out and swung the rear door open. "Try me," he said softly. "Just try me." Tall, wide-shouldered, thickly muscled, he stood poised, glaring at the man.

"Take me home," his passenger said meekly. "Please take me home. I'm just a little drunk. Too drunk to walk."

"Okay," Jerry said. "I remember a few times when I was just a bit too drunk myself."

It was typical of him that, having won in any contest, he always felt just a little sorry for the other guy. They rode the rest of the way without exchanging a word.

The house was dark, a great jewel without prism in a setting of languid palms. Even without brilliance, it whispered of money beyond comprehension to all but the chosen. Of stone, glass, and wood, it hugged the crest of a hill, atop a steep drive between precisely manicured hedges.

The man climbed out awkwardly. Without looking at Jerry, he reached in the window and let a bill fall to the seat. It was a ten. The meter had clocked a dollar twenty. Jerry fumbled for change but when he looked up the man was drooping at the front door, then vanished inside.

Jerry smiled. "We all have our little surprises, don't we?" he mumbled. Then he threw the flag up and sent the cab grinding back down the long drive to the road.

He had driven less than a half mile when he was teased

by some missing element linked to the man's appearance as he entered the house. In the projection room of his memory, he replayed the scene in slow motion and solved the riddle at once.

When he found the portfolio case resting on the floor in back, he pulled off the road to examine it. Fingering its soft, rich leather, he held the case unopened on his lap, enjoying the delay, the churning joy of speculation.

Since the man had clutched the case as if its loss might be at least a small disaster, it might very well contain the complete answer to all of Jerry's problems.

That was, of course, a wicked thought, and he was not, by nature, a very wicked person. Yet, under certain circumstances, when pushed to the limit . . .

There was the time, one of many, though this was the granddaddy, when he was borrowed up to here and gone. Furniture loans, auto loans, house loans; personal loans, one- and two-signature; salary advances; loans out of the pockets of friends, all were at saturation. Still, he'd had to feed the insatiable maw of the gambler, so he had written checks until you could hear them bouncing all over town, collecting in a great pile of rubber on the desk of the district attorney. He might have gone to prison but for the last-minute grace of his father, who had gathered the money from half a dozen sources in an agony of sacrifice.

What would he do, Jerry mused, if he found the case overflowing with the green blood of a new life? He could return the money in the feeble hope of a substantial reward; or he could deny having found the case, playing it cool, insisting that, if the case really had been left in his cab, some other passenger of the night had discovered and made off with it.

In the end, searching his character for the rock bottom of truth, he concluded that, while he was certainly not a thief in the literal sense, it came down to this: Could he get away with it?

He turned the edge of the case toward him and gave the zipper a decisive opening yank. He held the case under the light.

There was nothing but papers, sheets and sheets of clipped, typewritten papers. He glanced at them briefly, inattentively—something about the proposed merger of two corporations, on and on and on in a legal maze of stilted boredom.

Jerry sighed unhappily. For a minute he had seen that golden door opening. Well, to the man, those papers were important. Another ten-bucks? He shrugged. It was worth a try.

He was a bit startled to find the house still cloaked in darkness. Maybe the guy couldn't even make it to his bedroom. Maybe he had collapsed on a sofa.

Jerry got out, taking the case with him, and moved toward the house. He had taken only a few steps when he heard the muted but unmistakable lash of a gun. He paused in stride, cocking his head. Immediately, the sound was repeated; twice; rapidly.

He stood welded to the spot. The suggestion of death filled the void which now settled around him, smothering him. Far from heroic, he was frightened. Yet, perversely, he was drawn to the house, to the mystery and threat it might contain.

He toed forward, came to a window, crouched to look. He had been wrong, there *was* a light. Invisible from the drive, it beamed narrowly in the distant, back reaches of the house, as if slicing from a partly opened door.

He couldn't think what to do. Get on the radio and tell the dispatcher to send the police? He might make a fool of himself. Perhaps his oversensitive imagination had developed pictures of dark drama where there was only a harmless incident, easily explained. It would be better to assume nothing, explore the situation first.

He danced lightly around the side of the house. At the

rear, it enclosed a swimming pool. Sliding glass doors opened upon it. A faint radiance escaped from behind the partially draped doors.

He approached the glass and fastened his ear against it, but heard nothing. He moved soundlessly to an undraped section and stood peering into a living room. A wedge of light cast itself upon a sofa, a lamp, a chair. Now, in this wedge of light, a figure loomed clearly.

It was a woman, a young woman. Burnished, hemp-blonde hair drifted down the soft ivory slope of her bare shoulders. In profile her features appeared to have a fine, gem-clear definition. A pale green sheath embraced the urgent sweep of her slender body. Tensely balanced, transfixed, she stared toward the front of the house.

Jerry followed her gaze to understanding. Beyond that wall of glass you could see the bulky silhouette of the cab, its headlights bursting over the drive.

It was as if he studied some frantic tableau which described the presence but not the form of a screaming evil. His thoughts churned in search of a plan, then he decided to play dumb and let the pieces fall.

Jerry loped around the house and fingered the bell. As he expected, she was in no big hurry to answer. He rang again. After a crawling, measureless interval, the door opened.

"Yes?" she said. "What—what do you want?" Her voice teetered on the thin edge of hysteria. The expression on her delicate face was like splintered china too hastily cemented, the cracks already showing.

"The gentleman wanted me to bring him this case," Jerry composed. "When I brought him home just now, he told me he had left it at the hotel, so I went back for it. He said the case must be delivered to him, personally."

Her tender, tremulous mouth circled around words that had no sound before she said, "That's—that's all right, driver. I'll take the case to him."

Jerry frowned, made his expression doubtful. "Are you his wife?"

"Well, no," she said. "His wife is in the hospital. I'm an old friend of the family." Her quick smile wept.

"Sorry," said Jerry firmly. "I'm afraid that won't do. I'll just have to give him the case myself. I'll come in and wait, if you don't mind."

Before she could answer, he had swept past her and bulled into the room. A lamp had been turned on, the living room was bleakly illumined. The door at the far end, from which the light had seeped, was closed. To fortify his position, Jerry moved deeper into the room.

"What do you think you're doing!" she cried after him. It sounded, Jerry decided, like a barely controlled scream. Ignoring her, he sat on the arm of a massive chair.

She closed the front door and scampered toward him, all but running, then paused. "You get out of here!" she hissed. "Now! This minute!"

"You're falling apart," said Jerry. "Frightened little pieces of you are dropping all around me. Try to be calm. I didn't come to murder anyone. I just want to give the man his case."

That stopped her. She was fearfully still. She could have been listening to the ticking of a bomb.

"What do you want?" she half whispered. "What do you *really* want?"

"I told you." He held up the case. "The man said this contains invaluable papers. I intend to see that they get into his hands, even if I have to sit here all night."

She nodded. "I see. Yes, I see what you mean. You're expecting a—a tip, a reward. Well, if that's all, I can handle it. Would fifty dollars satisfy you? Would that be enough?"

Jerry's eyes roved over her dress. If there were stains, he could not detect them. "Fifty dollars?" he said. "That would be too much. It's a five-dollar errand, ten at the most. I'm surprised that you would offer me fifty dollars for a five-dollar service. And I'll tell you something—it worries me."

Her pretty little jaw dropped. "Why should you be wor-

ried? I can afford it. If you couldn't use fifty dollars, you wouldn't be driving a cab."

Jerry pursed his lips. "You have a fine sense of logic," he said, "and you're damn right. I could use fifty bucks, but I think what you're hiding would be worth a hundred times that much. That is, if I were the kind of guy who would demand it."

She crossed to a table where she searched in an outsized purse for cigarettes, paused in the act of lighting one. "What are you trying to say?" she asked, her green eyes narrowing. "What on earth are you driving at?" She lighted the cigarette with a quivering hand.

"Ahh, come on now," he answered. "Let's end this charade. Let's turn over the cards. You see, I heard the shots."

Shuddering, she collapsed into a chair, began to cry softly, covering her face. "It—it was an accident," she moaned.

"A three-shot accident? No, I don't buy that. I suppose it's silly for me to ask—but he's dead, isn't he?"

Her head dipped lower, she rocked in her chair. He waited until she sat up, wiping tears with the crook of a dainty finger.

"It would help if I knew who we're talking about," he said. "What's this man's name?"

"Vandergrift," she said weakly, eyes lifting to that sealed door. "Floyd Wilson Vandergrift."

"Doesn't ring a bell. What did he do to get all this?"

"Nothing," she said bitterly. "He played, he had fun, the way Roman emperors had fun—usually at the expense of other people. His father left Floyd forty millions. Since then, the hardest thing Floyd ever did was to approve big deals and sign a few legal documents.

"He was an incurable lecher and a sadist. He was a truly horrible man."

Jerry nodded. "I can believe that. I spent a few minutes with him. It was enough. I got the message." Jerry stood, moved away.

"Where are you going?"

He looked back over his shoulder. "Is that the room?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he went on, opened the door.

It was a paneled den, handsomely furnished. A lamp and table had been knocked to the floor. Still burning, shade bent and twisted, the lamp spilled light across the rug and over the body of Floyd Vandergrift.

He had been shot in the neck and chest. His white shirt and gray suit were splashed with crimson. His last expression was one of astonishment, almost as if he hadn't known that his forty millions could not buy immortality.

Jerry leaned against a desk, gulping air, then staggered out.

For nearly a minute they sat in silence. She appeared deceptively soft and frail for a man-killer. Where was the savage feline who had blasted Vandergrift from life?

"Why did you do it?" he asked her.

"Because—because he was strangling me. He had me down across his desk with his hands around my throat. I knew he kept a gun in the top drawer, so I reached over and got it. He was so intent on strangling me, he didn't notice. When I felt myself going, I shot him." She gently felt her neck.

"Three times?"

"It could have been three times or twenty. I was in such a state, I hardly remember pulling the trigger. I barely heard the noise."

"How did you happen to be in his house?"

"He—he brought me here earlier. We were talking, arguing, really. He was already a little tight. He got a call, something about a business deal, and told me to wait, said he wouldn't be long. Then he drove off."

"In his own car?"

"Yes, but when he had too much to drink he often left his car and took a taxi. Anyway, I sat in the den, reading. When he returned, he—he tried to make love to me. I

resisted him. It's a very long story, but I used to be—involved with him.

"He was going to divorce his wife and marry me, if she didn't die first—so he said. He wasn't all black; he had charm and magnetism, and yes, money to burn. I thought I was in love with him, but while he was gone I—well, I read some letters I found from other women, and I knew he was *never* going to marry me."

"So then you shot him."

"No, no! When I told him I was finished with him, he just laughed and went to a safe hidden behind a panel in the wall. He tossed two stacks of hundred-dollar bills on the desk in front of me, told me to go out and buy some pretty toys and let him know when I needed more. Then, as if he had just bought me, he began pawing me.

"I squirmed away. I said things that even his giant ego couldn't withstand. I threw the money at him. That was when he attacked me and I shot him."

Jerry shrugged. "I'm pretty sure the cops will believe you, and so will a jury—if you tell it just that way." He climbed out of his chair. "I think it would be best if you made the call yourself. It would look better."

"Oh, no!" she cried. "I can't. I simply can't! Don't you understand? You make it sound cut and dried, purely self-defense, but they won't see it that way. There would be doubts, lots of doubts, headlines in the newspapers, filthy insinuations degrading me."

She began to sob. "And—and until they were good and ready to try me, I'd be locked away in some—some smelly dungeon with the kind of slimy animals they keep in those places. Even if they didn't send me to prison or the gas chamber in the end, I couldn't face that. I—I'd rather die right here and now."

Jerry nodded. "Everything you say is true. If you got off free, it would still be a nightmare, but you did kill the man. While I'm hardly one to play God, can I turn my back and just walk out?"

"Of course you can! Do you think anyone would ever know that you came in here? Suppose they did? Suppose you were seen? You delivered some papers to Mr. Vandergrift. You saw no one but Floyd Vandergrift. If someone shot him, that was after you left. Who would tell? Certainly I would be the last one to talk."

"You're very convincing," he said, "and being a most attractive woman to boot, you've got a lot going for you. Just the same, I don't think I should—"

"Listen," she said quickly, "how much do you make as a cab driver? A hundred a week?"

"It comes to about that. Why?"

"How would you like to take a year off, with pay?"

"You kidding? Of course, I'd like to take a year off. And don't tell me who would provide the traveling money. Let me guess."

She reached in her purse, crossed the room and extended a packet of bills. As he took it from her hand, her trembling leg brushed against his own electrically, the subtle-sweet perfume of her settled over him.

He riffled the bills with his thumb, green hundreds passing in review. They carried him to a golden swath of beach where he lay supine beneath a lazy summer sun. They flew him to Las Vegas, where he spread them across the green felt of the gaming tables and watched them multiply. Their magic carpet sent him to Santa Anita, where his own swelling shout rose above the crowd voice as the horses thundered across the finish line. . . .

"Five thousand," she said. "It's yours, and it demands nothing from you—but silence."

He looked up at her. "You might not have needed this," he said, "but it helps." He stuffed the money into his pocket. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

She went away, turned. "That's the gamble you take. . . . And why do you smile? Is it so funny?"

"Not unless you knew me better. Okay, let's move! What did you do with the gun?"

"It's right here in my purse."

"Fingerprints?"

"I don't think—"

"You have to know! Take this handkerchief and wipe anything you might have touched. And where are the servants? He must have servants."

"He let them off until Monday. He planned to visit his wife at the clinic, was supposed to fly there this morning but he delayed another day."

"Good. It'll be a while before they find the body. Now get to work on those prints!"

She raced about, dusting furiously, disappearing behind the door of the den. When she returned, he wiped the portfolio case and left it on a table.

"Does anyone know you were coming here?" he asked.

"Not a soul."

"Would Vandergrift have told anyone?"

"Not a chance. In public he was a self-righteous hypocrite. He was afraid his wife would catch him and take his money. He's been waiting for her to die, rooting for the end."

"You still might be a suspect."

"Perhaps, but just one of many. I told you that he—"

"Skip it. Let's go, let's go!"

As they were leaving, having turned out the lights, she kissed him suddenly, lingering over it, caressing his back with pulsing fingertips. At any other time, with such a woman, he might have fallen into a fatal spin.

"You're a very sweet guy," she murmured. "How can I ever—"

He covered her lips, then ducked out the door to douse the lights of the cab before she got in. "Keep down in back," he warned her. "Out of sight until it's safe."

He slid the cab down the long curve of the drive, relieved because the house sat aloof from its neighbors.

As they neared the east gate exit she sat up, composing herself in a dark corner of the cab. Pausing for a signal, he turned once to look at her. She seemed untouched by evil,

was innocence itself, her guilt a fiction, unreal as the bulging thousands in his pocket.

"Where do you live?" he asked her.

"Take me to the Beverly Hilton."

"Is that all I'll ever know about you, the Beverly Hilton?" He gave the flag a downward yank.

"It would be dangerous for you to know anything about me. Forget me. Live your life, be happy."

"Happy? What does it mean? I never learned how to be happy. I used to be excited some of the time. Is that happy? At least give me a name. Am I asking a lot?"

She hesitated. "Just think of me as Laura. It's a name I always liked."

"Just think of me as Jerry," he said. "It's the name I've always had."

They rode then in silence. He was engulfed by depression, even as he used to be after a frenzied spell of gambling. The night had been a discordant music, off-beat, wild, macabre—but unfinished.

"Good-bye, Jerry," she said at the Hilton door. "I won't say 'thanks.' It's such a tiny word."

"Your gratitude is in my pocket," he answered. "Now you're on your own. Be careful—'Laura'."

Then she was gone, swallowed behind the glass doors of the hotel lobby.

He circled, counting the cabs nudging each other on the hotel stand set in darkness fifty yards from the entrance. There were three, the limit was four. He took the last spot, set the brake and reduced to parking lights. He flamed a cigarette and watched.

The hotel was a dodge, of that he was certain. In time she would have to come out. Someone would be there to pick her up, or she would take another cab. Either way . . .

Mel Wetzler was first up. Jerry could see him leaning against the front cab, chatting with Dave Conley, a young actor down on his luck. Jerry slumped deeper in his seat. He was in no mood for Wetzler or Conley or any of the

others. He was already in flight from their orbit and they would sense his distraction, resenting it.

She came out in twenty minutes. She stood uncertainly at the curb, her eyes darting about, probing the darkness before she turned and spoke to the doorman.

Mel Wetzler sped around and drove her off when the doorman blew his whistle. For an absurd moment, Jerry thought of following; in his own car, yes, but not in the cab. She would catch on quickly enough, even if Wetzler didn't, and there was a better way.

Wetzler was a quarter of an hour late checking into the garage, but Jerry stalled, sipping coffee and standing on the fringes of a group heatedly discussing a new contract proposed by the union.

Jerry told Wetzler, ". . . I had a ten mixed in with the singles I gave that dame when I changed her five. Didn't notice 'til I got on the stand and started counting to see if I made book. Then I saw her get into your cab, figured you'd have the address, and I'd nail her tomorrow night when I came on."

Wetzler got the address from his trip sheet and gave it to Jerry with a small gem of wisdom: "Even if you don't get the ten back, it's worth the trip. Man, that's some looker! A guy like you could make a connection." He winked. "Lemme know how you make out, huh? No kiddin'. Maybe she's got a twin sister."

The address was in shacky, beatnik Venice on the ocean. Jerry was puzzled. Somehow he had expected to find her enthroned in a penthouse atop one of those gleaming towers of the rich at the edge of Beverly Hills or Westwood.

Just before noon of the following day, he drove out to Venice in his own tired sedan. Beyond the easy excuse of mere curiosity he could find in himself no clear motive for taking the risk. He knew only that he was compelled to see her again, that really there had never been a choice.

He found the place a few blocks from the POP amusement center off a narrow alley disgraced by broken bot-

tles, swirling papers and moldy garbage. It was a wood-frame, sooty-white duplex. Bay windows gazed out across a corrugated litter of sand to the gray-blue ocean.

A multitude of signs threatened to have him towed away if he dared to park on any of the streets or alleys which divided these ruins; for it was summer and the public beaches were swollen by the worshipers of sun and sea. Spying a vacant carport, Jerry gambled that its owner was at work and could not return before five.

The lower half of the duplex was empty. A scarred expanse of hardwood floor, barren of furniture, could be seen through salt-smeared glass. Below the stairway to the upper level he paused to glance at the twin mailboxes. There wasn't a name card in either frame.

He mounted the stairs and knuckled the door.

She wore a bathing suit, a bikini of paneled black and gold; flimsy islands of cloth surrounded by a warm sea of pink-white flesh. The blonde silk of her hair had been swept up so that now it crowned her head. Nearly devoid of the night's makeup, she was not less beautiful, but more real. He could see the pale brown star of a freckle branded on her cheek.

She drew a sharp little breath. "You followed me!" she accused. "And I trusted you. Oh, why did you have to come here!"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I suppose it was curiosity."

"Is that so? I think not. Our arrangement was fine last night, but today you're not satisfied. Isn't that it?"

"Do we stand here and make it a public debate—Laura? Or will you invite me in?"

"What would you do if I refused?" Her green eyes narrowed, knifing him.

"I'd find some way to persuade you."

"I see." She turned disgustedly. He went in behind her and closed the door.

It was a small, L-shaped living room sparsely furnished

in bright maple, the splashy colors of cushions and lamp shades hectically gay.

She sat tentatively on the edge of a window seat, hugging herself as if the scanty bathing suit embarrassed her dignity. He sat uncomfortably in a hard maple chair. At least she was angry, and that was positive. Having come without the armor of any special plan or conviction, he was groping in the dark, letting her lead him, toward what?

"More money?" she said, reaching for a cigarette, lighting it. "Last night it was a willing gift, today it's blackmail. How much?"

"Did I ask for money?"

"You didn't have to. You're here, aren't you? Did you come for a swim? Bring your bathing suit?"

"What would you do if I did demand more money?"

"You'd have to give me time to raise it. I paid some debts this morning. I'm all but broke."

"Well, I didn't come to blackmail you. As a matter of fact, I felt a bit guilty about taking hush money just because you were in trouble. I went along with you because I believed your story and because I knew that, even if a jury believed it too, you were in for a long, rough ride, the kind of public torture that might break a sensitive person."

When she said nothing, he paced to a window, turned. "The money was a bonus. I took it on impulse. I thought it might help me patch some old wounds, give me a new start, but when I got to thinking about it, I began to wonder if taking blood money, so to speak, didn't cheapen my motives.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not a do-gooder. There's damn little of that in me. Right now I'm not sure if I mean this nobility stuff I'm spouting, or if I'm a fake, just rationalizing." He went back and sat down.

"Sure, I need money," he said. "I love money. I'm crazy about the green that buys all my kicks. But let's compromise. I'll share it with you. Since you're nearly broke, we'll spend it together."

For seconds her face was a stone. "Are you real?" she asked. "Because if you are, you must be a nut. A nice sort of nut, but still a nut. I never met anyone like you. If you wanted blackmail, at least I'd understand you."

She touched his cheek. "Forget your little guilt," she said. "It's just a grain of sand compared to mine. Go out and spend the money. Have a ball, but not with me. There's no room left in me for fun and games. I'm fresh out of the stuff that makes people go. Inside, I'm dead and buried."

"Then we're alike," he said. "They buried me a long time ago. We're just alike."

"No," she said gently, "I don't think so. We're not at all alike."

He reached out and pulled her to him. She offered only a token resistance before he kissed her. Frantically clinging to her as if she might be the last piece of driftwood in an open sea, the stark loneliness of his existence flooded him with sudden terror.

"Maybe," he said, releasing her, "if you hadn't kissed me last night, I wouldn't be here now."

"That was an impulse," she answered. "A kind of thanks. So was this, but it won't happen again. I've got nothing to give you but trouble." She stood and moved away.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Tell me that."

"I'm Laura," she said. "Just Laura, to you."

"Can you blame me for wanting to know more? Don't you put a name on your mailbox?"

She crushed her cigarette in a ceramic tray on the coffee table. "I'm only here a short time in the summer," she said. "I pick my mail up at home."

"Where's home?"

"No comment." She smiled thinly. "Did I ask you to come here?"

"No."

"Then don't ask questions, don't be a detective."

"I'm not afraid to talk about myself."

"That's different. You have nothing to hide. You drive a

cab, you're not in any trouble. Why *do* you drive a cab? You don't look like a cab driver, you don't act like one."

"How does a cab driver look? How does he act? Is there a pattern, a mold? College professors drive cabs here in the summer; actors between parts, all types of people. I used to be advertising manager for a big company. Would you believe that?"

"I'd believe it."

"About last night," he said, approaching her. "It happened just the way you told me, didn't it? I mean, you're not really—"

"A murderer? Go ahead and say it. You want to be convinced again, don't you? You want your picture of me to be only a little soiled, not drenched in the cold blood of an unforgivable crime. In that way your conscience will be clear and you can justify the fact that you allowed me to go free, to escape punishment."

"I think that's true," he said, "and I couldn't have put it better, although it goes deeper. Despite that horrible business of last night, I find myself liking you. I feel drawn to you, and I don't want it to change."

"Don't like me," she said. "Don't be drawn to me. Just leave me and don't ever come back, for your own sake, for mine. If you need a little something to soothe your conscience, I'll give it to you. I'm a lot of things you would despise if you got to know me, but I'm not a murderer. I'm as human as you are. I have feelings, I have compassion. I never meant to hurt anyone. Take that much with you and go. I won't talk about it again."

"The subject is closed," he said happily. "Listen, let's forget the whole thing, together. I'll take the night off, maybe a couple of nights. We'll do the town. This town or some other town, if you like; San Diego, San Francisco. Better yet, make it Las Vegas! Whatta you say?"

She sighed. "You're hopeless. You weren't even listening. You didn't hear a word I said. I don't want to go anywhere, with you or anyone else. I don't even want to forget. You

must know a dozen girls. Call one up. Forget with her."

"I work six nights a week," he said. "On the seventh I go to my cell, my twelve-by-twelve room. I think, I read, I fall asleep. I haven't had time for girls, or money. I'm in hock to half the world. That's why I have no girls to call."

"Well, I'm sorry," she said, "but you'll do all right, now that you can afford to have a good time."

"You won't change your mind?"

"I won't change my mind. Please go now."

"Do you need some money?"

"I don't need anything but to be alone!" she cried.

"It's the shock," he told her at the door, "but you'll get over it. Then your mood will change."

Jerry did not take the night off. He decided to wait a couple of weeks. Then, if the police did not so much as glance in his direction, he would resign.

As usual, he checked into the garage at five P.M. He tried to avoid Mel Wetzler, but Wetzler cornered him in the locker room.

"Gonna catch up with that dame tonight, get your sawbuck?" Mel both grinned and winked hugely.

"I might do that," Jerry said casually. "I need the dough."

"You may not get it," Mel advised. "But like I told you before, it's worth the trip if you can make contact." He winked again.

"She's probably married, has a couple of brats," Jerry replied. "All I want is my dough."

Friday nights were good. Jerry didn't sit dead on a stand for over ten minutes in the first three hours. He had two trips to the airport, took a couple of loads to city hotels, and was hustled over to the Valley.

Just after eight o'clock the dispatcher sent him to a motel on West Pico. Two sailors were waiting there. They were pretty well in the bag and boisterous. They wanted a fast ride to the POP amusement center in Venice.

When he had delivered the sailors, Jerry struggled with

temptation for only a minute. Then he swerved into the alley and headed south. It wouldn't hurt just to cruise by the house and take a look. With a few blocks between them was he going to turn tail and run?

From the alley he could see the back of the house. The blinds were sealed but there was soft light behind them to announce her presence.

Nevertheless, he went on, feeling the urge racing his pulse, goading some twisted, bottomless hunger. He was restless. His thoughts bounced off walls of frustration and shattered. The job would no longer come into focus, the night fell apart and left him empty, groping.

He needed a drink. He desperately needed a drink. He drove north on Main Street until a green neon cocktail glass beckoned him. He pulled up in front, removed his yellow hat, and reached into his pocket for the tie he carried habitually. Hatless, wearing a plain dark suit and tie, he felt restored, anonymous. He went inside and sat at the bar.

Jerry ordered a drink and gulped it down. He ordered two more and drank them slowly. He called for another and another, and when they were gone, he knew it didn't matter. He was in the driver's seat—all the way. No pun intended, though it made him chuckle.

Let her scold, let her accuse. Who was *she* to accuse *him?* He left at ten and went out to his cab.

He waited forever at her door. What was the big deal? Why the silly delay? Then she opened the door, wearing a white sweater and a beige skirt. Plain as boullion soup, but she made it regal as champagne. He tried to remain steady.

"Laura," he said expansively. "Laura, baby!"

Her icy stare shriveled him, burst the fragile balloon of his ego.

"I'm not very surprised," she sneered. "I was rather expecting you." She stood aside, he entered.

"What is it this time?" she asked. "What do you want?"

What did he want? It was there a moment before, but now it had escaped him. She had sent it away, erased it

with her relentless eyes, her disdainful manner.

He stood naked. All at once he needed some kind of gimmick to hide behind. "I—I got to thinking about—"

"Again?"

"Yes." He laughed idiotically. "The money. I can't accept it," he lied. "I want to give it back." Now he was trapped, but later he would squirm off the hook.

"That's great," she said. "I'm thrilled. Let's have it then."

"Well, I didn't bring it with me. I wasn't sure, you know. But I could get it in an hour."

"Do that," she said. "Run, Fido, fetch me the money."

"That's no way to talk to me! C'mon, loosen up. Come with me. We'll stop for a drink. You gonna stay here alone, crying for that devil?"

"What makes you think she's going to be alone anywhere?"

In unison, they turned toward the voice.

He stood framed in a doorway which opened off the living room. He had tar-black hair and a swarthy complexion. His pretty Latin features and obsidian eyes were vacant as unfurnished rooms.

Jerry saw the pistol extended toward him in such a way that he knew the man intended to kill him. A vast stillness overwhelmed him, and in that moment of stillness he understood what it was that he had wanted all along. Then the gun exploded, hurling the cruel bee of lead to sting his heart. Mindless as wind, he sagged to the floor.

"Why!" the blonde woman screamed at the man. "Why did you kill him!" she moaned, clutching her head and staring incredulously at the body. "You promised me! You said if he came back you'd only scare him away."

"So, I scared him. Didn't I, Joy? I scared him to death. Listen, he was asking for it, begging for it. I know the type. Nothing could shake him loose. He was only setting you up, getting ready for the big squeeze. Give him a week or two and he would've had the whole fifty grand."

"Oh, how brilliant you are!" Joy said tearfully. "You think

like a con, you act like a con, and that's just what you are at heart, Tony. If—if anything clean and decent and—and beautiful walked right up and shook your hand, you wouldn't recognize it."

She sat limply in a chair, looked up at Tony in amazement. "What happened to me? What madness ever made me want to spend a single minute of my life with you?"

"Money madness, for one," he answered, shoving the gun under his belt and looking down at the body. "I should've killed this guy last night. He was a natural. I might've been able to make it look like Vandergrift came in and caught *him* busting the safe.

"Vandergrift shoots him dead. Yeah—but the cabby isn't alone. His partner shoots Vandergrift and walks out with fifty thousand. Neat, huh?"

She stared at him blankly, not really listening.

"Funny," he said, "you don't think of those things when the pressure's on. It hit me right over the head driving up here tonight, but at the time it sounded to me like you had him skinned and in the bag.

"The way you twisted the truth about how it was between you and Vandergrift, just enough so it fit like a glove—Man, you won the Oscar for that performance. I figured, why not? Why not let him think *you* shot Vandergrift. It was worth five grand to get rid of him. How did I know you'd lead him here?"

"What does it matter?" she said. "It's finished. We'll get caught now, and I couldn't care less."

"You're outta your head! What makes you think we'll get caught? When everyone's dead in bed, I'll dump him on the beach a couple of miles from here. No connection."

"No connection?" she said. "How do you know that? He was going to take the night off and he was dressed for a night off, so he must have come in his own car. Where is it? What does it look like? We don't know."

"What's the difference? Is this the only house in the block?"

"No, but suppose he told someone he was coming here? Suppose he confided in some friend?"

"You must be stupid, Joy! Really stupid. Why would he tell anyone? Why would he put his own neck in a noose?"

"I don't know," she answered. "He was just that sort of guy, reckless. He didn't seem to care what happened to him. If he did tell anyone, the police will trace him to us. Then they'll find out that you've got a record and that I was Mrs. Vandergrift's nurse. Could they ask for anything more?"

"Shut up!" he said, turning his head, listening. "Did you hear that?" He crossed swiftly and snapped off the lights, opened the blind and looked down.

"A couple of small-time lovers," he reported. "Punk teenagers trying to find a way in downstairs. They saw the place was empty. But I don't think they heard the shot."

"Leave the lights off," she said. "Nothing is real in the dark. Open the windows wide. I want to hear the ocean. I want to smell it. There's something clean and fresh about the smell of the ocean."

He snorted. "There's nothing clean and fresh around here for miles."

"How true," she said. "Oh, how true."

He hoisted the windows wider and fell into a chair. "I need a drink," he muttered. "That's what I need."

"You don't know anything about needing, Tony," she said. "Oh, why did you do it? I liked him. I—I liked him a lot. Compared to him, you're a monster."

"Shut up!" he growled. "That's enough outta you! He was just another dope. He didn't know when to quit. In my world, they eat his kind for breakfast."

"He was a little crazy," she murmured to the darkness, "and terribly mixed up. But he was a nice guy, a very sweet guy."

"I gotta have a drink," Tony said. "Go make me a drink, will ya, Joy?"

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